

Anatomy *of* Madness

and other stories

Anatomy of Madness and Other Stories

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Selected by readers

Edited by

Jatindra Kumar Nayak



Prafulla Pathagar Publication

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To the memory of

Prafulla Kumar Dash

the litterateur who died young.

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I have great pleasure in thanking the authors of the stories included in this collection.

I thank all the friends who made it possible to bring out this volume. I feel indebted to the translators and the Editor, Jatindra Kumar Nayak for sparing their valuable time. I express my sincere thanks to Sikshasandhan, Bhubaneswar, K. Majumdar and Vision Grafix for designing and digitisation.

H.N. Samant Singhar
President, Prafulla Pathaghar

Prafulla Pathagar Award

The Prafulla Pathagar Award for creative writing and translation was instituted in 2001.

Prafulla Pathagar requested readers writers and publishers to send the stories published during a particular year which they liked most. Out of the nominated stories, an Editorial Board consisting of eminent writers, short-listed a few for translation. The members of the Editorial Board were also free to nominate stories. The short-listed stories have been translated into English. From among these, the story, which has been chosen by the largest number of readers, receives the Prafulla Pathagar Award. This includes a cash award of Rs.10,000/- and a citation. Other authors receive citations and mementoes as tokens of appreciation. The reader, who first nominated the award winning story, receives a citation, and a cash award of Rs.2,000/-.

The translators receive citations and cash awards.

Every year, as and when we can afford it, we propose to publish at least ten short stories nominated by the readers, writers and publishers. Prafulla Pathagar is committed to publishing a collection of the stories in English translation.

Nominations are invited from readers, publishers and writers to send the copy of the magazine or the book in which their favorite story appears, to Prafulla Pathagar.

Nominating Readers, Writers and Publishers

Anatomy of Madness	Dr. Aparna Mohanty, Kapaleshwar, Kenduapara (Winner of the Best Reader Prize)
Address of a Lost World	Kshirod Das, Fund Section, A.G. Office, Bhubaneswar
Illusions	Kshirod Das, Fund Section, A.G. Office, Bhubaneswar
Apocalypse	Pratima Jena, Kortal, Jagatsinghpur
The Train	Basanti Dash, I.T. Colony, Salt Lake, Kolkata - 700 097
The Journey	Krupa Sagar Sahu, Eastern Railway, 4, Fairlie Place, Kolkata
Virtual Love	Sujata Dash, I.T. Colony, Salt Lake, Kolkata - 700 097
Different Strokes	Editorial Board
Hunger	Ashutosh Parida, 502, RRL Bhubaneswar - 751 013
Darkness around Indranil	Editorial Board
Shadow of God	Editorial Board
The Mistress of the Forbidden Hamlet	Writer
Swan Song	Writer
Father	Amrutayan Publisher

Introduction

English translations of fourteen Oriya short stories, all of which were published in 2001, have been brought together in *Anatomy of Madness and other Stories*. The original stories were selected with the help of readers, publishers and, in some instances, writers themselves.

The stories included in this collection help us arrive at a certain understanding of how short story writers in Orissa define contemporary reality, how they experiment with the short story form, whether their work constitutes points of departure from the established tradition of story-writing and also how they build on the achievement of their predecessors. In short, one finds in these stories continuity as well as change.

Interestingly enough, quite a few stories in the present volume centre on the father-son relationship, a favourite theme with short story writers in Orissa ever since Fakir Mohan Senapati wrote his famous story, 'Dak Munshi' (The Post Master). By focusing on this relationship, short story writers seek to illuminate aspects of the generation divide, conflicts of values, and the transition from tradition to modernity. At least two stories included in this collection revolve round a moment of discovery on the part of a son towards which the narratives relentlessly build up. Other stories in the volume continue the tradition of moral and social enquiry so well established in the history of the genre in Orissa. They interrogate ossified conventions by locating characters in a changing and problematic social milieu.

One feels also the shaping influence of a new sensibility in some stories featured in this collection. In these events do not unfold in order to capture characters in a revealing moment of their lives, nor do they expose hypocrisy or dramatise a breakdown of the moral order. Instead, characters here find themselves in a world where their very identities have become fluid and ambiguous, and where old certainties no longer obtain. They, therefore, seek to reinvent themselves, often painfully, in a blurred, shifting landscape. They undertake mysterious journeys, transgress boundaries set by social conventions, and play games having complicated, changing and unpredictable rules. Stories such as 'Address of a Lost World', 'Virtual Love', 'The Journey', 'Different Strokes' and 'The Darkness around Indranil' invite readers into a world of fascinating yet unsettling possibilities.

This effort will be amply rewarded if readers feel drawn into such a world.

Jatindra Kumar Nayak

Anatomy of Madness

Ramachandra Behera

Binay knew how inconvenient it would be to have his father around in his cramped little first floor flat, and how miserable for the old man who had lived all his life in a remote little village to settle down in alien surroundings. One thing for sure: there'd be unpleasantness aplenty. For everyone. Was it worth the trouble? Did he have to pretend to be as dutiful a son as the mythical Sravankumar who had carried his decrepit parents on his shoulders all over the earth? All modern-day sons were too worn-out living their own precarious lives, weighed down by all kinds of cares and tension, without the time or the inclination even to think about their old parents tucked away in villages, let alone worry about them. Did Binay have to prove he was an exception? To make matters worse, his father had reportedly gone half-mad. That was what the letter he had received hinted at.

Binay's contact with his roots had become tenuous and could be summed up in a few words. While still a schoolboy, he had lost his mother. A thin, short, high-strung woman of few words, she did every chore in the house, from looking after the cattle to offering evening prayers with a lighted wick to the basil plant in the courtyard. She could never stop worrying about Binay. If he caught a cold, she'd go on a fast, which sometimes lasted a whole day, profligate with pledges and promises to gods and goddesses; faith and devotion, she believed, moved mountains. Even a speck of dust on her darling boy caused her pain and suffering. After her death, it was a distantly related widowed sister of his father's who ran the household, and she did her job with such finesse that people said only government contractors could match her in thieving. His father was aware of it — the villagers had started telling tales at the first opportunity — but he realized that to send her packing would be far worse. Besides, didn't she steal only to help out her wastrel of a son and a miserable married daughter who was always in want? How she still managed to keep things going with the little money left after meeting Binay's boarding school expenses remained a mystery. She deserved praise, if anything.

His father was a loner, a recluse, now more than ever, and had not shown even the slightest desire to come to town and live with him. For his part, Binay, too, never tried to persuade him. He had serious doubts whether Father would be able to recognize Suni, his daughter-in-law – although it was he who had selected her after a long search — let alone his eight-year-old grandson, Jim, and five-year-old granddaughter, Rosie. For the grandchildren too the old man had become something like a wayside billboard – noticed casually and forgotten quickly. The family's village visits were infrequent, and the old man was more edgy than happy to have

them around. Even his communication with his son remained a desultory affair: Son, your wife looks worn-out, has she not been keeping well? . . . Tell your boy not to climb up the guava tree, he won't listen to me . . . What's that ugly mark on your daughter's cheek, did she have a boil or something? . . . When will you come home again? . . . Why don't you take a sack of fragrant rice with you when you leave? The harvest isn't far away . . . Vegetables and coconuts are being regularly stolen from our garden . . . There'll be no honey collection this year . . . None of this was meant to elicit Binay's opinion or suggestion, or for that matter his sympathy. He simply had to go through the motions of making conversation with his visiting son. Left to himself he would have preferred silence. Somehow he was never comfortable in company and grew more diffident and ill at ease if he had to make small talk. Even dealing with the village shopkeeper he found an ordeal; if the dress he bought had a tear, or the cereal some stones, he never went back to the store to return or exchange them.

A distant uncle, who had retired as a schoolteacher about a year ago, had written the letter mailed to Binay's office address. Binay found himself going through it again and again. The hint that his father had gone soft in the head was loud and clear. Though there was no cause for alarm yet, the uncle had generously added, it did seem odd that a lonely old man was left to languish in the village when his well-heeled son lived with his wife and children in a nearby town.

So what should the well-heeled son do now? Binay thought. Bring his father over? Obviously, yes! Show him to a doctor? Of course! Whether there was room for one more person in his tiny

flat was no longer the question. The old father needed looking after, and if the son neglected him, it wouldn't look good. So, in the end, what mattered was what others expected the son to do, not what the son wanted. Home from office, he waited until he had changed and had tea with his children. Then he handed his wife the letter. "Read this."

Suni's face fell when she went through it. "What will you do?" There was a nervous edge to her voice. "Go see him? Shouldn't we all?"

"Is that enough?" Maybe yes. Just as long as people saw he cared for his old man.

"What else?"

What did her voice betray — fear, anger? Or just a plaintive cry?

"I must bring him over." His voice sounded harsh. Perhaps he wanted it to sink in that he would do as he pleased, that he'd brook no dissent. "I must show him to the best doctor. On the medical opinion will depend my next course of action." He paused. "Worrying about the additional burden, are you?"

Suni blanched, feeling naked and exposed. Did he ever mince words? Who would believe he was the son of a shy and diffident man who was forever short of words? "No, no, no trouble at all," she said. "Surely we can't sit back doing nothing when Father needs our help most. The question is whether he'll agree to come over. Think how many times we have tried and failed!"

He was pleasantly surprised: never before had his wife shown such spirits.

"Very well, I'll be off to the village early tomorrow morning. I've already applied for a day's leave. No need for all of us to make the trip. If I succeed in persuading Father to come with me, we'll be back before evening." He got up. "We'll give him the front room."

What was it — a suggestion, a command? She couldn't figure out. Two fears had started gnawing at her mind. One, with the children and Binay away from the house on weekdays, how would she spend the time with a demented man under the same roof? Didn't mad people often turn violent? Why couldn't the old fellow be packed off to an asylum where he belonged instead of being let loose on her? Two, how long would he stay here? Suppose he took sick — God forbid, a stroke or something, which left him paralyzed? Who would wash him and clean the sheets? She hadn't either the mind or the strength to look after someone she was not close to. They had seldom met, and she had never warmed up to the reticent old man. How'd she bring herself to look after him?

She felt terribly apprehensive. It's like bringing a time bomb home. The eventual explosion would pulverize her world. The first casualty would be her children's studies. They would be constantly exposed to a madman's antics that only outsiders might find amusing. As far as she herself was concerned, she would need to lock herself in whenever she was alone; the household gadgets and goods would have to be kept out of the old man's reach. But why, oh dear, why did a man who'd never ever hurt a fly suddenly go mad? His tranquility, his profound silence, no more than a mask, a mere façade, then? Is violence a deep-seated human instinct that rose up once the surface was scratched? The more she thought about the future the more scary it appeared, and the more she tried not to think about it the more she did. A menace seemed to hang in the air.

The next morning Binay took a taxi and drove to his village, and because he had an early start, he covered the distance of one hundred and fifty kilometres before nine o'clock despite the road being very bad. Their village house was a modest affair: four rooms, a tile roof, a small courtyard and a wide front verandah.

He found his father sitting on the verandah and rummaging in an old tin trunk. A sign of his madness?

"Have you come alone?" his father asked.

Binay observed him closely: a short, thin, pale old man, white hair, snow-white eyebrows, face furrowed with wrinkles, toothless gums. When did he last shave — twenty, twenty-five days ago?

"Yes." Binay sat down beside him.

"I wasn't expecting you." He continued to rummage among the papers. "How are the kids — all well?"

"All well."

The old man sounded so normal, he seemed so much like his usual self that Binay's anxiety deepened. Nothing he noticed could remotely be considered madness.

"I didn't expect to find you home at this hour," Binay said. "And what is it you're looking for among these papers?"

"The farm work's over for the time being and I'm free. God knows why I awoke this morning with an urge to re-read your old letters. I remember I had them stashed away in this box."

How normal he seemed! "What made you stop shaving? It gives you a sickly look."

The old man looked up with a smile. "I've taken a leaf from a holy man's book. Whenever he spoke on the scriptures, about the gods and goddesses, he got so carried away he shed tears. Watching and listening to him had such a powerful effect on me that I too began to imitate him — cry, laugh, whatever. People said even my gestures began to resemble his. Of course I didn't do any of this consciously."

Binay's heart sank, his face twitched. This wasn't Father he had known all along. He wasn't given to speaking so much in one breath, let alone expressing his profound feelings so freely. Could some bearded holy man's religious discourse have brought about such a dramatic transformation?

"Father," he begged. "I think you should come and spend some time with me."

"Why not?" The old man's face brightened, his voice alive with a rare enthusiasm. "Now that there's respite from farm work, I was toying with the idea myself. Haven't seen the kids for ages. Tell me, do you say evening prayers and offer worship at your place?"

After he had nodded yes Binay felt a momentary stab of conscience. Why did he lie? But wasn't Father's eagerness to visit him a symptom of his madness? Never before had he shown the slightest desire to stir out of the village.

That afternoon, Binay dropped in at the retired schoolteacher's. After all, it was he who had taken the trouble to write to him.

"There's this roughneck," the retired schoolteacher said, "a college

dropout, who drinks like a fish and terrorizes the village at knifepoint. I'll kill all the villagers first, he'd declaim, then the rest of humanity, and finally God Almighty Himself, disemboweling Him and plucking out His innards. ."

Binay looked up, surprised.

"One afternoon when this hooligan was on his hobby horse, your father pounced on him, gave him two stinging slaps, one on each cheek, and before the fellow could react, walked away, as if he had done nothing unusual."

The retired schoolteacher wiped his face with his towel and added, "That evening I went to your place and told him off. I told him bluntly that he hadn't acted wisely, that there was no need for an old man like him to take on a bad character, and that it could have cost him his life. Can you believe, he didn't even bat an eyelid, let alone admit that he had done something stupid? Worse still, the incident had gone clean out of his mind. Now, Binay, what does it tell you?"

There was yet another incident the distantly related uncle thought was worth mentioning. A poor villager, a truly needy man, lost his only son, the breadwinner of the family. The boy's death had left his family utterly helpless, in dire straits. When Binay's father visited the bereaved family, he broken down. 'Bloody coward!' he began to rave and rant, berating the dead young man, tears streaming down his cheeks. 'Why did you choose to die? Were you scared of having to work hard to earn money and looking after your poor hapless parents? Would any sensible young man in your place have done this? Like a coward you've run away!'

"Now Binay, does it strike you as normal?"

"I've never known Father to behave like this," Binay admitted.

"My opinion too," the distant uncle added forcefully. "I'm convinced the poor dear's off his rocker. Until recently he was the gentlest, the quietest man in the whole village. Those of us who love and respect him are unable to accept this change that's come over him."

"Any instances of violent behaviour?" Binay inquired, after a long pause.

"Not so far." The retired schoolteacher's voice betrayed disappointment. "But there's this other incident which took place just about eight or ten days ago. Somebody was giving a wedding feast, and your father wanted to be among those who served food to the guests. There was absolutely no need for a frail old man like him to exert himself, but he wouldn't listen. You know what was his explanation? He said he was so happy to see a marriage without dowry taking place that he would find no peace and happiness unless he did his bit in looking after the invitees. Of course, strictly speaking, this wouldn't qualify as a madman's capers."

What could Binay say? He was happy that Father had shown eagerness to come with him. Nothing else mattered. He looked forward to starting immediately after lunch.

Walking back home, he wondered whether all those incidents added up to anything. Maybe Father who had never before shown his true feelings, his gut reactions, was now past bothering about people's opinion; maybe he was past being a mere spectator, a shadow; maybe he had decided to give vent to the emotions he had

so far reined in. Not one of the incidents seemed to reflect poorly on Father's personality; whatever he had done was honourable, even ethical, there was nothing appalling, nothing humiliating, about his action! More than anxiety Binay felt an upsurge of respect for his old man.

"You live upstairs?" his father asked when they got off the taxi.

"Yes."

"I may have trouble climbing the stairs." But after climbing two steps, he said, "No problem. I think I can manage. Will the driver carry the bags up?"

Upstairs, there was deathly silence as if the place was in a state of a shock. Scared, dry-mouthed, the children hung behind the door, watching every move of the old man. Even Suni wouldn't come near but greet her father-in-law, lowering her head onto the ground, from a distance.

"Good to see you, daughter," the old man said cheerfully. "But first I'd like to wash. Where're the kids? I don't see them."

The kids retreated further into the darkest corner of the house. As Suni showed the old man the bathroom she found her heart thudding, her mouth parched as a desert, her blood frozen.

The bags were put away. The old man was settled in the front room. And he seemed perfectly normal.

"People are perverse," Binay told his wife, trying to allay her fear. "They've been maligning Father for no reason at all. Can't you see he's perfectly normal?" He discovered his children hiding in the

kitchen and wasn't at all happy about it. "What have you told them?" he confronted his wife. "That their grandfather is a raving lunatic?" He looked at the kids. "Look here, there's nothing the matter with Grandpa. Go and greet him, and you better do it properly, touching your head to the ground. He's been asking after you."

The children traded worried looks. Could Father's assurance be relied on? Mother's face was a blank.

Binay herded them into the front room, and the kids, wanting to greet the old man from a distance, and ready to bolt at the first opportunity, had to be pushed closer. They shrank at the touch of their grandfather's gnarled and trembling fingers.

"Which class are you in, my sweet little mad thing?" the old man beamed at his granddaughter.

Sweet little mad thing? What a curious form of address, Binay thought. But it seemed to exude love and warmth too, and Rosie showed exemplary courage: her arms around the old man, her face against his, his bristles pricking her pale pink cheek, she had stopped cringing.

"Still in the nursery school," Binay answered for her.

"And the little imp?"

"Standard Three."

The beaming old man hugged his grandchildren and then held them away so that he could feast his eyes on them. His crumpled, corrugated face glowed with pride and joy.

Binay could feel the atmosphere growing less oppressive.

By ten o'clock next morning — the children at school and Binay in his office — the house seemed to resonate with emptiness. Suni was in the kitchen and the old man out in the balcony — ten feet by four, giving on to both the front room and the bedroom, which overlooked a picture perfect landscape. Binay had filled his father in on the place while they were having their morning tea. The head office of the company in which he worked as an engineer had shifted here only recently and it was only a matter of time before it became a bustling place, there'd be several residential blocks and all amenities; the children's school was close by; it would be one of the best addresses in the town in a few years.

"Daughter," the old man suddenly said, "did I hear someone knock on the door?"

Suni gave a start. Her attention had been on the cooking and she hadn't noticed her father-in-law hovering at the kitchen door. For a brief moment she wondered who he was and was so bewildered that she nearly let the frying pan slide off the stove. Why should anyone knock on the door instead of ringing the bell, she thought as she hurried to the front door.

There was no one at the door. When she hurried back, a trifle irritated, she found the old man stirring the pan.

"Who was it?" he said, not looking up at her. "Or did my ears play a trick on me?"

Suni felt a stab of panic. Who said this man was normal?

"There was no one at the door," she said. "Father, please leave cooking to me. You don't have to see to it. Go and sit in the balcony or lie down on your bed."

He spun around with a strange laugh, which made her close her eyes in fright. "No one at the door? Was I hallucinating, then?"

As soon as he was out of the kitchen, Suni wiped the beads of perspiration from her neck and face, wondering whether it wouldn't be prudent to lock the door. She tiptoed to the doorway and peered out. The old man was sitting quietly, and the sight was as reassuring as it was disquieting. What was he? A human being of flesh and blood or just a shadow? Why was there such an air of unreality about him? How would she stay under the same roof with someone who made every real thing seem unreal to her?

She bolted the door, drank some water and, fighting back her tears, hurried through the cooking.

But she felt no better even when she went back to the bedroom and stood under the fan; her anxiety was so oppressive that the cold sweat on her body wouldn't dry. The silence was unnerving. It was difficult to believe that there was another soul in the house. She felt a chilling numbness within. Why was he so quiet? His silence had suddenly blurred the line between life and death. Couldn't he at least clear his throat, or make some human noise, or walk about, or do something to prove he was alive?

She tiptoed to the door and opened it a crack. The old man sat grinning at someone; the newspaper had fallen off his hands.

Presently he raised his hands as if he was clasping someone, someone tiny and dear, to his breast; his lips curved to assume the shape of a kiss and he seemed to caress the invisible being. The sight was disturbing. What was the old man up to? Was he actually holding someone whom only she couldn't see? How could anyone ever

find this man normal? She wondered for the hundredth time, feeling so helpless that she didn't know what to do. Run away from home, have a fight with Binay, tell him to take the old man back to the village? Never before in her life had she felt so vulnerable. She took out a bottle of cold water from the refrigerator, washed her face and neck and drank a few gulps. Then she switched on the television, wondering which weapon of self-protection she must keep handy. The kitchen knife? Jim's cricket bat?

During lunch with his son, the old man turned suddenly very talkative. "Binay, have you noticed the roadside jamun tree? I saw an unforgettable sight under it this morning. A young mother with a baby at her breast. She was suckling her child with such profound feelings of joy that I could feel the vibrations. I wonder whether owning the house she was breaking her back to help build would have given her greater happiness. You should have seen how she was caressing and kissing her little one."

Binay and Suni weren't impressed. After all, a mother's love for her child was only normal, and they had come across such scenes before. But only now could Suni fathom with a sudden sense of relief the gestures the old man had made earlier.

"Father," she said. "Remember the gestures you were making this morning when you sat out in the balcony?"

"Making gestures? Was I? Really?"

"You seemed to hug and kiss a baby. Your face radiated joy and you seemed lost to everything."

"Was I?" He sounded not ashamed but pleased with himself. "These days I forget things so fast. Sometimes I can't recall what I did or saw or said even a moment before. Yes, sometimes I do catch myself making motions and gestures. Watching that fond mother — oh yes, now it's coming back to me — I thought I too was holding a little child. So what's his name? I began to think. Binay, Suni, Jim, Rosie? How I wished I had a real little thing in my arms, a baby that'd make me forget the world, make me feel I was greater than God Almighty Himself!" His eyes welled up with tears.

Binay and Suni were amazed. Father had never been so emotional.

The next day was a Sunday and the whole family was at home. The old man, after breakfast, was sitting out in the balcony, expressions on his face changing like a kaleidoscope. First it went pale, drained of blood, then his brows knitted, his face twitched, his lips trembled, and finally tears came streaming down. From time to time he dabbed at his eyes, impervious to being watched by his son and son's wife.

"Father!"

The old man gave a start.

"You're crying!"

"Am I?" He wiped his sunken eyes. "You're right." He looked away and gazed down at the road. "Can you see the funeral procession on its way to the cremation ground? And can you see the grief-stricken young man following behind? I first imagined him

to be Binay and the deceased his mother. Then I thought why should the dead be his mother? It's I, I his father. Imagining myself dead and laid out on the bier didn't sadden or scare me in the least. All I was thinking was how horrible it would be for my grieving son, how it'd break his heart to light my pyre."

Binay and Suni were stunned. How cool, how collected, normal Father looked! How quiet his tone!

What happened around five that afternoon was something unforeseen. No one had noticed when the old man had slipped away from the balcony and gone down the stairs to the road in front where a fierce quarrel was in progress. It was his commanding voice over the din that brought Binay and Suni scurrying out.

Egged on by a knot of onlookers, someone was mercilessly beating a woman; the woman too was trying to return a few blows; they no longer looked like human beings but like fiery balls of beastliness and violence.

"Have you all ceased to be human?" The short, thin, white-haired old man seemed to flicker like a flame in the depths of darkness. "Instead of breaking it up, you're enjoying it!"

No one paid any heed to his words. The beating, the howling, the exchange of vile curses continued unabated. Undaunted, the old man elbowed his way through the throng to the centre.

"Away with you, you old fool!" The wife-beater gave him a violent push, which sent him crashing to the ground. His lips split, the skin came off his knees and elbows, and a lump appeared on his forehead.

After being shown to a doctor, the old man was taken home and made to lie on his bed. But he looked so defeated, so dejected, his toothless gums gnashing.

"What on earth made you go there?" Suni, distraught, shaken, demanded. "Did you imagine you'd bring the brute to his senses?"

"I don't know what came over me. The thought that the man and the woman could be my Binay and Suni was more than I could bear. The earth, water and air seemed to whirl around me, and I don't remember what I did afterwards." He paused. "But I'm such a silly fool. Why should I have imagined the quarrelling couple to be my son and daughter-in-law? Something's wrong with me. Of late I seem to be considering myself to be at the centre of things — everything that's happening is happening to me; I and my family are the entire world; we're the ones who are being born and dying, loving and loathing, being loved and despised, grieving and being grieved over. All this is a recent development, nothing like this had happened before. You know I'm basically a quiet old fellow not given to displays."

The old man looked devastated, as if he had set in motion something that had spun out of control, something that would cause irreparable damage.

"Binay."
"Yes, Father."
"Shall we go see a doctor?"

"But we saw the doctor only minutes ago," Binay said, as if to reassure him. "He gave you an injection and some medicines. Remember?"

"I was thinking of seeing a psychiatrist." A sigh. A tremor of hesitation. "Maybe he'll know whether I've gone mad."

A tremor passed through Suni. "Father," she said. "Forget psychiatrists. You aren't mad. There's nothing the matter with you. The truth is that you're turning over a new leaf, becoming a finer human being, a more evolved soul. And nothing of this kind ever happens without God's grace! It takes arduous penance to reach this state."

Translated by K. K. Mohapatra.

Address of a Lost World

Chandra Sekhar Rath

It was sometime around midnight. A gentleman standing under a lamppost looked around blankly. He looked for a place to sit if he could find one. He seemed utterly exhausted. He was aged nearly sixty.

Nilambar babu, a nice man, always came forward to help people in times of need. It was extremely hot inside his house in this sultry weather. His son on his shoulder, he stood outside, wearing a lungi.

"Are you searching for someone, uncle?" asked Nilambar babu. The gentleman looked up at him but said nothing. His wrinkled face was covered with sweat.

Nilambar babu waited for an answer. Perhaps the old man was trying to recollect something

"I have been searching since morning. It is almost midnight. But inspite of trying so hard, I can't find it. Whom

should I approach for help? I am feeling embarrassed", said the old man, smiling shily.

"You could take my help", said Nilambar babu.

The gentleman lowered his head and smiled to himself.

"You may find it strange, but I can't find my own house. I am tired of searching".

Nilambar babu smiled and asked, "How long have you stayed in that house?"

"Well, how do I answer that question ? Nadia was born in that house. Now, he is doing a job for the last five years. He has a family. We have been staying in that house, I think, for the past 30 years".

"Strange! I think you were in service when you shifted to that house!"

"Yes. It is a government quarters. Now it has been transferred to Nadia's name."

"Having spent 30 years in that house you should be able to locate it blindfolded."

"May be, that is exactly what I had been doing so long. But strangely, I can't find it today. I find the entire surrounding unfamiliar. For instance, I cannot recollect having seen you ever before."

Nilambar babu smiled as if he understood what he was being told.

"Okay Sir, give me five minutes to change. I will accompany you. I think Nadia babu is your son. I guess he must be of my age. I will be back in a minute."

When he came back, Nilambar babu saw that the old man had not moved. One could not be so confused at this age. But he is looking so miserable and helpless–like a lost child!

Nilambar babu addressed him in a matter-of-fact tone, "Come along sir. I will reach you to your house. Now tell me, what is your house number ?"

The old man shook his head." My house number? That is precisely what escapes me now. Somehow I can recollect the hundred odd houses I peeped into, but I can't recollect my own. I have really tried very hard. But I have failed. I think such strange things do happen when one gets old."

Nilambar babu laughed heartily on hearing this. "Really, you are a strange man! Forgetting the house where you have stayed for the last 30 years is like forgetting one's own name!"

The gentleman looked bewildered and confused. He was in no state to appreciate joke, thought Nilambar babu.

"You are right. Forgetting my own name is nothing strange. One tends to suffer from forgetfulness when one nears fifty. In my case, it was an acute problem at that time. The mind starts wilting. One can recognise people, but recollecting their names is a great problem. Once I could not remember even my son's name. And, at another time, my wife's. Oh yes, that was while collecting my pension. Thankfully, my son was around. He reminded me that his mother's name was Tilottama. And I said, 'May be'. Everyone laughed."

Nilambar babu smiled too. But he also found himself in a difficult situation. What was he going to do with the old gentleman at this unearthly hour? The roads had become

empty. The moviegoers had all gone home after the late night show. Now and then, the sound of dogs howling came. One could hear the Nepali gorkha's whistle at a distance. Perhaps at the Kalibari chowk. Nilambar babu looked at his watch and realised with a shock that it was five minutes to twelve!

Nilambar babu walked aimlessly down the main road, with the old man in tow. The sky was dotted with wispy cottonwool clouds. A pale half moon peeped from behind them. Nilambar babu began to feel disturbed. What have I let myself into! This is what restless people like me deserve! Stupid ass!

"This way we will never be able to locate your house. Give me some clues which will enable me to find it", said Nilambar babu.

"Anybody can recognise our house from the distance of half a mile. No one else has a wood apple tree in that area. The tree is special. I had ordered the sapling from Kashi. One can never forget the scent of the ripe fruits it bears. Right next to it is a siuli tree. But what is most attractive about the house is the dense foliage of a guava tree. My son grew up playing on its branches. And his friends, too. And you say we won't be able to recognise the house? Have patience! We will definitely get there."

Has this old man become senile? How could Nilambar babu keep his cool ! And why ! Does it matter if the house can't be located? It will never be found ! Wood apple, guava and siuli trees – can clues like these lead one his house? Knowingly I have invited this trouble. I could have left him to his fate, but now I can't get rid of him.

Nilambar babu was deeply disturbed. Suddenly he stood still.

"No sir, we won't go this way", he said firmly.

The old gentleman also stopped dead. Like a limbless puppet. He too never wished to go that way. In fact he never wanted to go anywhere. Slowly he walked into the grassy patch on the roadside. And sat down on it with a thud.

He stretched his legs, rested his face on his elbows and gazed, perhaps at the moon.

This old man is going to spend the night here. It was a sultry summer night. A few more hours and day will break. The night will pass in the blink of an eye. This is the best opportunity to slip away. It will be better to drop the old man home in the morning. The next morning.

Nilambar babu looked around. It was a desolate night. The clouds were thin and threadlike. The moon had grown brighter. He had to return to his house, which lay at the next turning. A mile or so away. It would be wiser to take the old man along. One mile. ....1760 yards! 5280 feet!

He felt lazy. Who would want to go back to that hot, humid cave? Is there any harm sitting here in this sultry night? Nilambar babu had spent many a night sitting this way, watching a play in the open air.

A gentle breeze blew. He too stepped into the grassy plot. "How many inches make a mile?", he asked himself. He calculated. Perhaps 60,000 snails would make a mile.

The old man kept gazing upwards. Nilambar babu looked around, his hands on his hips.

"You seem tired. We will begin our search after resting

ourselves a bit. What do you say?"

The old man crossed his legs and sat comfortably.

"Why?" he asked Nilambar babu after a while.

"Won't you go back home?" Nilambar babu asked.

The old man gave him a smile.

"I think we are fated to spend the night in the open. What do we do? I have built this city with my own hands. Those days a British gentleman had planned the city... Why don't you sit..."

Nilambar babu felt a weight fall off his shoulders. He stretched his legs and settled himself on the grassy plot.

"I can still recollect how a road stretching from one hill to another was built. I can also recall how the spaces were marked out for lakes. And there were rows of huts on the hills. There were 25 bustees in all. Bustees were divided into four groups. Each group had one hundred houses. The bustees were marked with English alphabets from A to Y. The graveyard was marked Z", the old man said.

"Great ! A fantastic plan !"

"That is not all. This is only a quarter of it. The rest three quarters would have been like a dice board. In all, the plan accommodated 40,000 houses. Any further expansion would have followed a definite pattern. Only the roads would have to be expanded...got it?"

"How nice, really! But the place we now live in has nothing to do with the plan you described!"

"The crowds did not keep it so. They made roads

whichever way they wished. They destroyed the area completely. So, I am like a lost lamb in this town. There is no system in evidence here. The place has gone totally wild ! People are digging up and building houses wherever they want. They have destroyed everything by making it crowded. The government quarters where I stay has changed its number five times ! And the number I can't recollect now is going to be changed soon. That is what my son informed me."

He laughed, shaking his head, amused at the silly ways of the world.

"Okay, let it change. We should not be affected by the winds of change. One remains entangled in one's own web. But let me tell you, Sir, the house which has been allotted to Nadia is one of its kind in the entire town. My son may not agree. You see, the year he was born, we built a cowshed in the backyard and the guava tree and the wood apple tree grew in the front yard. By the time he started school, we enclosed the veranda and converted it into a drawing room. He studied there, undisturbed . And when he got married, the entire house was given a fresh coat of paint. The doors and windows were repaired. The space in front of the house was fenced in with barbed wires. A gate was constructed. All those who saw it were amazed. One can't take such liberties in a government quarters. But I had connections. The entire town can't boast of a house like mine. The house stands at the crossroads, and gets a lot of air and light."

"Is Nadia your only son?"

The old man smiled. "Isn't one enough? Our whole world revolves around him. What shall we do with a handful? The hard work one has to do to raise one... You too have a

family of your own. I'm sure you will understand. How many children do you have?

"Four. Two sons and two daughters", answered Nilambar babu.

The old gentleman went quiet, like the trees around... Probably he got stunned after hearing of the number of my children. Nilambar babu smiled to himself.

"But it is true. Those who have one son are very lucky."

The old man smiled without uttering a word. Nilambar babu suspected he was grieving silently. Was he? But the old man said smilingly, "But sir, what is sorrow and what is happiness in this world! The world still goes on.... sorrows and joys are a part of life. Whatever will be, will be."

Nilambar babu felt uncomfortable.

"Sir, shall we get up, and try to locate your house?" he asked.

"I don't mind. But our efforts will be useless; they will all be asleep by now. We should not wake them up", the old man answered.

Nilambar babu said, "No sir, I think they must be waiting for you on the porch. They will be worried about you."

The old man sighed, and smiled a bit.

"Are you crazy! If one is worried, can one sit quietly? Once when Nadia had not returned till late, I searched for him like mad and almost fell into a pond. Another night, he was down with fever. He was delirious. Panic-striken, I ran five miles and fell unconscious at the doctor's doorsteps. This is how the strings of affection pulls us. One only sits on one's

doorstep waiting for the cattle to return".

Nilambar babu felt put down. That is true. The sixty-year-old man had not returned home, yet nobody had come out in search of him! At least his wife should have...

As if he could guess his thoughts, the old man said, "No sir, nothing of that sort. I have seen a lot... But still, I feel Nadia must have gone out to look for me. His son has not been keeping well lately. So, he is upset. The daughter-in-law keeps running to her father's house. As long as my wife and I live, she will not think of this family as her own. Poor Nadia is torn between conflicting loyalties. But my wife has decided to stay with Nadia. There is no way out. Difficult times are ahead of us. Who will take care of us. I can't even take care of myself."

Nilambar babu was saddened. He sighed, and said nothing.

The old man straightened himself up.

"Okay, it is pretty late now. I don't want to trouble you anymore. Come, I will see you to your house. Your children must be worried. They may call your neighbours to search for you. Come, let's go", he said

Nilambar babu got up.

"How strange! I had come out to help you. But it seems you have troubled yourself on my account. Anyway, we will have to pass that way. So, I will peep in and inform my family. Then we 'will set out in search of your house', he said.

The old man stepped into the road. The two walked silently. Nilambar babu tried to find out more about him, but the old man answered only in monosyllables. He dragged his

feet and breathed heavily. Nilambar babu slowed down on purpose.

The old man smiled a little and said, "Are you tired?"

They reached the lamp post. Nilambar babu's colony seemed desolate. There was nobody around. He knocked on the door.

"Please wait here a minute. I will go and inform them and will be back soon", he said.

The old man said nothing.

Nilambar babu entered his house. He heard conversations inside. And the sound of children crying. A little while after, Nilambar babu came out.

He found no one under the lamp post. He looked about him. Strange! The old man was nowhere to be seen. He stepped into the road and looked around but he saw no one.

The poor old man didn't want to trouble me any more and went away. He had not done anything wrong! Forget it, no use continuing the search, he thought. He returned home and bolted the door from inside. Outside was a lonely road and a lonely moon. Inside there was his own world : warm and intimate.

Someone woke up Nilambar babu, early in the morning. He rubbed his eyes sleepily and saw his wife and son standing near him. There was a letter in his son's hands.

"Babuli found this letter and the packet on the window sill. Someone must have kept it there last night," she said.

Nilambar babu woke up with a start.

"Where? Let me see".

The letter was written in a shaky hand.

"You are my Nadia. Your son is my grandson. This packet is for him. I am not searching for my house anymore. I know I won't be able to locate it. Once lost, it can never be found."

Translated by Monalisa Jena

The Shadow of God

Shantanu Kumar Acharya

One got a clearer view of the city from the top of the hill. The low treeless hill stood some eight to ten miles from the city. Two gentlemen in khaki, who had climbed it for some reason, ran into a labourer from a village down below and asked him, "What are you doing here? Cutting trees down?"

"No sir." said the man. He then folded his hands and bowed his head, looking down at the foot of the hill.

"Whom are you bowing to? Last year, a thousand teak saplings had been planted on this hill. Where have they all gone?" The gentlemen in khaki demanded. The man mumbled something. Maybe, he chanted a mantra.

"You don't know? Trying to act smart? Do you want to find out what we could do to you?" The two gentlemen grabbed his arms from either side and held him down.

The man started. He sensed what these two gentlemen, who looked like messengers of the god of death, had in mind. He now smiled and said, "Please have a little patience, sir. I am offering puja to the Lord. Arrest me when I am finished."

"Puja? What puja? What deity are you worshipping on this treeless hilltop?" they started cross-examining him.

"The divine purush. He is sleeping. Can't you see Him? Look down at the foot of the hill. He will surely manifest himself to you."

The two khaki-clad gentlemen turned to look at each other. Then they gazed down at the foot of the hill. Slowly, their field of vision began to expand. A few small villages encircled by forest lay at the foot of the hill. Beyond the forests stretched rice fields, which were bounded by a little river. The city lay on the other side of the river.

"Where? Who is sleeping? Who is that purush of yours?" one of the two gentlemen shook the left arm of the man violently. But then he found his own hand going suddenly limp.

One of the men in khaki, who stood on the right side, exclaimed, "Look." Then the two of them said in one voice, "How strange. A man is indeed lying on his back at the other side of the river."

"He is no human being, sirs." The man explained and bowed to that figure, folding his hands as soon as the two men in khaki relaxed their iron grip on his arms. Then he added, addressing the men, who stood like two stone statues

on either side, gaping at the strange sight unfolding below, "Don't you see? Lord Bishnu is lost in his divine slumber there. As you know, the name of our village is Bishnupur." The men in khaki nodded assent and talked to each other for a while. Then the three of them descended the hill together.

Word of this spread rapidly through Bishnupur. Local people went up the hill to see with their own eyes this unique sight. The picture that the city of Bikrampur presented from the top of that bare hill took everyone's breath away. Everyone agreed that Bikrampur, which was a modern industrial city, resembled a gigantic recumbent figure when viewed from afar or from a high place. Now, local people discovered great possibilities in this discovery.

"How about putting up a hoarding on top of that bare hill saying, Bisnu in divine slumber." We would announce through a loud-hailer in the city of Bikrampur that one could set one's eyes on Lord Bishnu if one stood on the top of the hill near village Bishnupur. From heavens above the shadow of Lord Bisnu's reclining figure has fallen on Bikrampur. Come and have a look. Imagine what would follow all this.' The young men of village Bishnupur felt terribly excited. They sprang into action when they sensed that their long cherished dream of turning the bare treeless hill near their village into a tourist spot was going to come true. Shortly afterwards, a huge hoarding appeared on top of the arid hill. On this were written in very large English characters: *VISHNU SIGHTING POINT – LOOK BELOW.*

A few young men of the village who worked as electricians took steps to make the letters visible from below at night. In

no time, poles were set up on the hill and cables were drawn to ensure supply of electricity to the hoarding from the transmission tower down below.

As the news of the hill in Bishnupur becoming an attractive tourist spot spread, in a few weeks' time, a little market materialised from nowhere at the foot of the hill. Tea and snacks came to be sold in small thatched rooms having mud walls. Alongside these came up a few shops selling fancy goods. Next to these appeared a wooden cabin. The signboard it bore could be seen from a distance. It said: Guide's Office.

This office was where energetic young men from the village worked from. Their job was to take the tourists, whose numbers increased as a result of the wide publicity given to the Bisnu Sighting Point, to the hilltop and to point to them from there every part of the reclining figure of the Lord. This was no easy task, for many inexperienced native and foreign tourists, who were ignorant of mythology, often got confused even after gazing for quite some time at that clearly visible, manifest figure. They would ask, "Where is he? Where is Lord Bishnu? I can't see anything at all."

It was at this point that trained guides were needed most. In order to turn the attention of the inexperienced tourist inward they gave them a brief description of the sleeping figure of Lord Bishnu and then say, "First pay attention to the huge thighs of the Lord. There is a narrow and elongated lake right at the heart of the city of Bikrampur. Nov. look at the two banks of that piece of water. Two rows of high-rise buildings stretch all the way to the horizon. Don't they look like two long legs of a man? Now, start from there and

try to locate the other parts of the figure such as the head, the neck, the belly and the chest. Having done this, turn to pay attention to the two hands. These are also the two arms of Bikrampur–on one side, the railway track and on the other, the long airport runway-- stretching to the right and the left from its shoulder. What you see in daylight presents a much more beautiful sight at night. When the streetlights come on at night, it seems as if Bikrampur is really a reflection on the earth of the reclining figure of Lord Bishnu in heaven. This is not what I think – ask others, if you like."

Suddenly, the tourists would exclaim in a chorus, "Oh God. What striking similarity. What a strange coincidence. Look, Look. There, exactly there. Look at the lotus-shaped navel. The chimney rises straight like a lotus stem. Don't you think so? The lotus blossoms, spreading thousands of petals.

... And you say that is smoke?"

"No." Gopal Bahinipati would say with an air of authority and bring the situation firmly under control before the materialist outlook of the tourists could spoil things, "Don't say smoke, sir. Say lotus petals. An immense, thousand-petalled lotus rises from the navel of Lord Bishnu. Look hard and tell me who sits in the centre of the lotus flower."

Gopal Bahinipati was the chief of the team of guides. Having passed B.A. (Honours) in Commerce from Bikrampur College two years ago, he was now preparing for his MA examination.

"Yes, yes, yes." The voice of the excited tourists cascaded down the hillside like the waters of a stream. They now

began to discover on their own the figures of Lord Brahma, the seven hooded snake god, Anant, and the two goddesses, Lakshmi and Saraswati, seated at the feet of Lord Bishnu.

As time went by, the shops in the bazaar at the foot of the bare hill went on multiplying, and many of the mud huts got rapidly transformed into permanent concrete structures having glazed doors and windows. Keeping pace with these changes, the number of vehicles also increased. On certain days, especially on Sundays or on festive occasions, the narrow bazaar lane got so crowded with tourist buses that one found it difficult to negotiate it on foot.

It was but natural that local people would inevitably explain the fame and prosperity, which so suddenly came to Bishnupur, in no other terms but that of divine grace. Elderly villagers now gave serious thought to the matter and deliberated among themselves on how to raise a permanent monument in appreciation of the bestowal of divine favour. At last it was decided that a yajna would be performed on top of the hill as the first step towards building a temple dedicated to Lord Bishnu there. The village committee unanimously accepted the proposal that the Gajapati King of Puri would be invited to the yajna as the chief guest.

The youth club, for its part, heartily approved of the decision of the village committee. Soon after this, arrangements for the construction of the temple began in great earnest on a carefully chosen site on the hilltop. The youth club assured the village committee, saying, "Don't worry. The number of tourists is increasing daily. The income of the bazaar has also grown larger. Getting

a temple built is therefore no big deal. So you go and invite the King and go ahead with making arrangements for the yajna."

The King and the pundits arrived at the site of the yajna on the appointed day. The King was no stranger to the fame of the hill. Nevertheless, eager to impress His Majesty, Gopal Bahinipati, who was the leader of the youth club and the chief tourist guide, started explaining, his voice quivering with emotion, "Please look there, Your Majesty. Please pay attention first to the two gigantic thighs of the Lord. Can you see? Look at that stream of blue water. The legs spread on either side of the stream. Sir, do you know what these legs actually are? They are the rows of multi-storied buildings of Bishnupur city area."

The King's response to this was only an amused smile. The pundit from Puri, who had accompanied the King, gave the young man a withering look and said, giving words to the King's thoughts, "*Urdhvamulamadhah sakhamshvatham praharabyayam chhandamsi yasya parnani yasta veda sa vedavit*" "Why do you talk nonsense when you should stick to the point using the right words. You should go through the Gita. You should also study the Vedas and the Upanishads. Is this how you should describe Lord Bishnu? Why do you use expressions like 'multi-storied buildings' when you speak of the Lord?"

Gopal Bahinipati's face turned red. His fellow guides, college students all, became grave. Their reaction, the looks they exchanged and their sudden loss of interest in the event made one feel that they might now voice their protest.

However, Madhu Patra, the president of the village committee, defused the crisis. He said, "Your Majesty. Gopal is the brightest star of our village. It is thanks to his exertions that this place has become a centre of pilgrimage. Be so kind as to take a look at this hoarding, Your Majesty..." Madhu Patra now invited the attention of the King to the large English letters on the huge hoarding.

For some reason, the hoarding had escaped the King's notice. He looked up at the legend *'BISHNU SIGHTING POINT, LOOK BELOW'* and gave another smile. Then he proceeded towards the dais along with the pundits.

The manner in which Gopal Bahinipati and his friends associated themselves with the performance of the yajna marked the beginning of their non-co-operation with the village committee. Efforts to organise funds for building the temple were now made with great vigour. Madhu Patra got a lot of receipt books printed for this purpose. He gave a few of these to the guides with the instruction that they should coax the foreign tourists to make as big a donation as possible for a worthy cause like the construction of the temple. He also gave a few receipt books to members of the bazaar committee. They were instructed to collect monthly donations from the shopkeepers in the bazaar and daily donations from peddlers selling sherbet, cucumbers, sugarcane juice etc. Patra made it clear to them all that, unless they exerted themselves vigorously, the temple could never get constructed.

The collection of donations went on at an encouraging pace. These days the number of tourists visiting Bishnupur had nothing to do with festive or auspicious occasions any

more. After the yajna was performed on the hilltop in the august presence of the Gajapati King of Puri, the fame of the hill had spread far beyond limits of the city of Bikrampur into states outside Orissa, maybe to foreign countries as well. For this reason, once in a while, a few white tourists, may be Americans, would arrive in Bishnupur. As soon as they got down from their big foreign cars, Gopal Bahinipati and his fellow guides would accord them a very warm welcome. Since they talked to the tourists in English it was difficult for the general public to figure out what passed between them.

That day, around three in the afternoon, a deluxe tourist bus arrived in the field adjacent to the bazaar in Bishnupur. When the tourists disembarked, one could hear a subdued but excited whisper from the guides sitting in their office. "Look. That Pepsi man is back"

As soon as Gopal Bahinipati heard the news, he warned his team of guides, "Don't get into an altercation with him like you did last time he came here. If he wants to put up a hoarding on the hilltop, why should we object? Don't you see how many tourists he has brought here in his bus?" "But Madhu Patra has asked us not to..." Niranjan said, smiling.

Niranjan was the nephew of Jagannath Palei, a member of the village committee. Like Gopal Bahinipati, Niranjan, too, was an educated young man. He was doing his MA in economics at Bikrampur City College.

"Madhu Patra? Huh. He is a tout, after all. What does he know about commerce? The only thing that old man knows well is how to misappropriate temple funds. The stupid fellow

invited the Gajapati King, of all people, to the yajna. Did the King give the money for building the temple? Already a year has passed since the yajna was held. Useless fellows." Saying this, Gopal Bahinipati left the guide office and went out to welcome the tourists. Niranjan followed him. To his fellow guides Gopal said, "Other tourist buses will arrive soon. You will take care of them. Let me go and talk to that Pepsi man."

The Pepsi man was not at all impressive to look at. But he was a seasoned salesman. The moment his eyes fell on Gopal Bahinipati, he recognised him immediately, and said, "Namashkar, Gopalda. Didn't I tell you last time that I'd bring another group to your place? I have brought fifty this time. All are Europeans."

Gopal Bahinipati smiled and shook hands with the man, and asked, "Where did you find so many foreign tourists? A very big haul, surely."

"I got these from Puri." The Pepsi man pressed Gopal Bahinipati's palm and peered into the eyes of this foolish village boy, who had walked into his trap. Why should they travel all the way to an industrial city like Bikrampur instead of going to Konark from Puri? Gopal Bahinipati banteringly cross -examined the Pepsi man. "I bet you have told them about the Bishnu sighting point here", he added.

"Of course. Of course." The Pepsi man let go of Gopal's hand and asked him in a low voice, "What happened to the proposal I gave earlier? The villagers still refuse to accept it?"

Niranjan stood close by. Gopal introduced him to the Pepsi man and said firmly, "No, that is not possible, Mr. Batra. People here are very conservative. You may put up a hoarding advertising Pepsi in the bazaar, if you like. But putting it up on the hilltop is simply out of the question".

"Impossible." Niranjan's objection carried more vehemence than Gopal's. "People will tear up your hoarding and throw it away. How could you suppose they would give you permission to put up a commercial hoarding on the hilltop? None other than the Gajapati King and the pundits from Puri have laid the foundation for the temple dedicated to Lord Bishnu to be built here. They will come here again after the temple is built to instal the idol of the Lord Bishnu lost in divine slumber. Planting here sign boards advertising Pepsi or Coca-Cola or whatever can by no means be permitted. We can never allow this, Mr. Batra."

"That's okay. Let's now climb the hill. These are foreign tourists. They have been made to wait so long. I have promised to them that I'll show them this rare sight." Batra led his tourists through the bazaar towards the hill. Gopal Bahinipati and Niranjan followed him. They took to the winding path that led to the top of the hill leaving behind the bustle of the bazaar below and the Hindi film songs blared by the loud speakers fixed on shop fronts. In the bazaar, Madhu Patra moved from shop to shop, a receipt book and a ballpoint pen in hand. He suddenly noticed a stranger, who sat on a piece of wet sacking behind a heap of cucumbers. He must have come from some other village. Armed with the open receipt book, Madhu Patra walked up to the vendor of cucumbers and demanded, 'Hey you. Give me ten rupees.

Who gave you permission to sit here?'

"I haven't sold a single cucumber yet. How could I give you ten rupees?" the man pleaded.

"I have no time to listen to nonsense. Do you think this bazaar was set up here out of pity for shopkeepers? Whatever you see here now was possible through the grace of the Lord. First He made himself manifest here. Then you all got the opportunity to make money. It is already a year since the bazaar came up, and yet we could not raise even fifty thousand rupees. You rascals have all turned into cheats. Your mud huts have changed into pucca houses in the brief space of one year, but we could not collect one lakh rupees for the temple."

Madhu Patra proceeded towards a vendor who sold sugarcane juice, a heap of sugarcane lying near him. Just at this moment a sound resembling a series of gunshots reached the bazaar from the hilltop.

Madhu Patra looked up and saw more than a hundred tourists, who had assembled on the hilltop, clapping their hands in unison. There were a number of foreigners among them. Men, women, children – all clapped at the same time and let out shouts of joy.

Everyone's gaze was fixed on Bikrampur. Down below, in the bazaar, everyone thought guns were going off on the hilltop. Customers as well as shopkeepers hurried out of the shops, scared. The microphones were switched off. A hush suddenly descended on the bazaar. All eyes turned to the giant hoarding on which were written in huge letters: *VISHNU SIGHTING POINT, LOOK BELOW.*

The letters on the hoarding seemed to waver a little. Then they shook harder. A little while later, they disappeared altogether from the field of vision of the people down below who stood gaping at the sight. Someone shouted, "Oh, look. The letters have vanished."

Madhu Patra felt utterly confused. It seemed to him as if Lord Bishnu made the signboard vanish in a moment of divine playfulness, through maya. Other onlookers exclaimed, "Oh, the signboard fell down."

Now everyone rushed to the hilltop. As they ran up the winding path they met the tourists coming downhill. Gopal Bahinipati led the tourists.

"Tell us, Gopal. What happened? Did the wind blow the hoarding down?"

"No, no." Gopal said, gasping for breath. "We removed it. It was our signboard after all."

"What? Your sign-board? You removed it?" People asked in utter bewilderment.

"You think it was your signboard? The youth committee had put up that signboard and the youth club decided to remove it. No one has any say in the matter." Niranjan and other members of the team of guides said "But what harm did that signboard do to anyone? Why did you remove it?"

"It did no harm to anyone. But it had become useless. Go and see for yourself. You will no longer get to see what you used to see from there." Saying this, Gopal Bahinipati made way for the tourists who stood behind him and led them down to the bazaar. People going up the hill made their

way to the hilltop.Gopal Bahinipati escorted the tourists to the buses and cars waiting for them, and returned to the bazaar. For his part, Madhu Patra felt completely bewildered. The receipt book in hand, he stood under a mango tree, keeping a strict watch on the vendor of cucumbers. Gopal Bahinipati walked up to him, took out a cheque for one lakh rupees and handed it to him, saying "Uncle. Forget small fries like this cucumber vendor. Here, take this cheque for one lakh rupees."

Madhu Patra could not believe his own eyes. He simply stood gaping at this impossible young man. "This is but the advance. The man will give more. All he asks for is the permission to put up his signboard on the hilltop." Gopal Bahinipati, the great doer, waited for Madhu Patra, the President of the village committee, to come back to his senses. Madhu Patra collected his wits, and demanded, "Permission to whom? What signboard?"

"The signboard of Pepsi company." Gopal Bahinipati spoke persuasively, like a salesman, "Go and see for yourself, uncle. From that point one no longer sights Lord Bishnu. You see instead five gigantic bottles of Pepsi. Two where one earlier saw the legs of the Lord, two where the Lord's hands lay, and the largest bottle lies where His body used to be. The shadow of Bishnu has vanished and five gigantic Pepsi bottles have taken its place. It is a spectacular sight, uncle. Now everyone sees Lord Pepsi from that point on the hilltop. Did you not hear them clap?"

Madhu Patra felt as if he would faint. He asked, his voice failing him, "Did you see it with your own eyes?"

"The sight presented itself to hundreds, not to me alone. The Pepsi man opened our eyes, as it were, when he said, Not Lord Bishnu's figure but five huge Pepsi bottles lie spread out there. Do you see? In seconds, the scene shifted. Didn't you hear the tourists shout and clap? After this we removed the signboard and threw it away. The Pepsi man will come and meet you, uncle. The temple will be built there but..."

Translated by Jatindra Kumar Nayak

The Train

Kishori Charan Das

The train was speeding away. Piercing the darkness, it kept going farther and farther. I stood holding the railing of the open door of our compartment. I wanted to experience the thrill of the indomitable speed of the train. It felt good. I imagined myself to be its intimate friend. Why not? I might not be able to move at this speed, but wasn't I having the full eagerness regarding this journey?

I felt elated. I wanted to tell the train, the cause of my eagerness. That I am Shobhan Das, aged twenty one, and that I am going to a place where there is someone who is my very own. Today, she is my lover; tomorrow she will be my partner for life. She has given that commitment in her letter, "You must come before such and such day by all means; otherwise I won't be there to meet you. I would leave for a distant city

for my college studies. And there in a new place, I would not be able to express what I want to tell you and the way in which I want to tell. No, I want to tell you those few words here only – those words that are worth remembering for all times. You would carefully listen to those. You would know what naughty things you would want to do with me after hearing those words. But I want to tell you those words in our own place – sitting on our favourite bench of the Radhanath Park and while picking up the shefali flowers lying scattered about us. What do you say? Would you come?"

That was the reason behind my eagerness, which fuelled the train – the eagerness, which made me leave my old and middle-aged fellow passengers to sleep comfortably and stand near the railing of the door. I enjoyed the speed of the train and the intensity of my eagerness. I wanted to feel the same to a greater degree. After all, the lives of my co-passengers were almost over or half spent, but my life was starting just now. They would not like to disrupt their sleep for the sake of speed or eagerness, but what would I get from sleep? They might have had another Alaka Mishra in their distant past, but what use is her letter now? Even if she and her letter-writing are still alive, which would make them recall her past invitation ? No, let them remain immersed in their happy sleep, if that can be called happy. I don't want to disturb them. My friend is the train, its unvanquished speed and its intense eagerness. One is complementary to the other.

I stood gripping the railing of the door. I felt the wind lashing my face. I also enjoyed the dark landscape speeding backwards.

How wonderfully splendid are the sky and the earth as they move ! The hills stand like black demons at the foot of the faded night-sky, as if guarding it. After a fleeting appearance, they move backwards allowing new ones to appear. The hills are of so many varieties – big, small, one touching the sky, another just a mere mound. One more hill passes by. Trees and creepers look like the unkempt hair on its body. Another hill at a distance looks like an ascetic lost in meditation in the silent night.

And above the hills spreads the sky. Who says, the sky is faded? May be the moon is not travelling with us. Also, only a few stars can be seen. Look, there is one star which is twinkling directly above my head – it badly wants to climb down from the plain sky and display its magnificent colour. I felt like talking to it, to give it encouragement and strength. I wish I could jump on to the top of some hill and look at the star from a point closer to it. Then we would talk. We would share our thoughts and emotions.

But the star didn't stay. It disappeared.

Though I felt empathy for the star, I didn't feel discouraged. When I saw the crest of a temple on the peak of a hill, I felt a desire. Irrespective of whether the presiding deity of the temple was – Vishnu or Shiva, I wanted to dedicate my consent to the deity – that consent which is going to bring me and Alaka together after two days. We would be sitting at our favourite place. A handful of shefali flowers may fall in a shower upon us at that time, but those flowers would never wither away nor get spoilt. Would the

deity happen to be Vishnu or Shiva? I hoped he would be Shiva, my favourite God. I was born on the eve of Shivaratri. So how can I not develop a special relationship with him? Then I wanted to open my eyes to see my beloved God in the temple. The capacity of the mind's eye cannot be underestimated.

But where? He has moved away long time back alongwith the hill and the temple. Shobhan, do you forget that you are in a train, which will take you in a moment from one place to another?

I felt like stopping at another place. A place very close by – just on the other side of the railway line in a hut. The hut might belong to a railway worker. There, in the light of the lamp, glowed two faces – a mother's and her child's. I could see the smiling chubby face of the child. Do you know, how I felt? I thought this scene had a special significance. After I marry Alaka, we may have a child like that with a full smile on his face. The child that I saw was the harbinger of happiness.

But where did he come from? I looked at his smiling face, as if I had seen it somewhere. He came and went. Such a naughty boy!

Then I became angry with the train and at its arrogance of speed. Yes, I agree, I must bow my head paying obeisance to your indomitable speed. But does that mean that you cannot stop even for a fraction of a moment? That would have allowed me to feel the experience, which would have remained only mine forever. I would have frozen that experience within

myself. Like the moment and the place which is going to be mine with its beautiful memory – when I and Alaka would sit together on the special bench, and the shefali flowers would fall on us .

But, thanks to your motion, speed and eagerness. Have you become completely blind? Or, have you turned into a faceless demon? What is the motion worth, if one cannot stop where one wants? And what is its meaning?

I got angry. But why would the train care for my disgust or anger?

I knew that it would not care. But I remained adamant and stood holding the railing. I wanted to prove myself. But gradually I felt that not only did it not care, but also it was mocking at me through its thunderous laughter produced by the friction of the wheels. It was saying, "Dear Shobhan, son of Munsif Mr. Gagan and lover of Alaka, don't you understand that there is no place or time that you can call your own? It is good that you have felt the speed of the mail train. You could also associate an eagerness with that. But you did not understand what it meant."

"Life moves from one moment to another. Which moment is yours? How can you say that the experience of sight, taste, smell and touch of the moment is your own consciousness ! How do you define your existence? On what basis can you call a place your own, find the actual basis of your life, or build a timeless Taj Mahal?"

"Oh you fool ! Are you not changing every moment? Perhaps you don't realize that. I mean, you are not able to

realize that directly and immediately, but you will, after some time. And even if you know that, you refuse to admit it. But is that not the truth? For example, take the case of your co-passengers, who are happily asleep. Would they not have been anxious one day to get their desired objects? They would have shaken hands with a train those days to match the speed of any vehicle or the ticking of a wall clock? But what has happened to them ?"

No, all are not the same. Shobhan Das is made of different stuff. I again want to know whether I cannot own forever the place and time of my choice, my life partner, and the experience connected with these?

The train did not reply, but just laughed. I felt frightened. I thought that matter would take a different turn in future when her parents would no longer be staying in that city why would the school teacher stay there after retirement?. Then we would get the opportunity to be together, but would not feel the urge to leave important work to go and sit in the park and waste time in recalling the past which included the fallen shefali flowers. Isn't this true?

Or it may so happen that we, middle-aged Shobhan and middle-aged Alaka, would go and sit there for some time, hand in hand, as a token of respect for the past memory. But this would just be a ritual. There would not be the slightest warmth or excitement – not a bit of eagerness. May be, we would be together in our bed on that day for the celebration of that memory – but that is different.

No, I am talking of beautiful romance, not dirty sex. I kept repeating that Shobhan Das was made of different stuff, and he fully believed that Alaka would be his wife. We were not mean, ordinary or average people.

But the train kept laughing.

Then I felt that it was speaking the truth and I was deceiving myself.

But I kept saying – No, no, no.

And then, suddenly, I stepped on the footboard as if I were going to give a fitting reply to the train to clinch the argument. I acted as if I would jump down and my body would come to a halt here. This meant that I would own this moment defying and deceiving time – at my own will and at my own behest. And that will be my self-created existence and an everlasting landmark.

Shobhan Das, are you mad? In death, how does the question of existence matter ?

I stepped back. But I am not used to getting defeated in an argument. So I told the assassin you may call it my madness or childishness. "If no single moment is my own, if existence has no significance in this floating and fleeting life, then what is the point of ushering in future moments? In death, there may not be success. Consciousness may get erased, but there is no question of failure. Rather put out consciousness, or is it not better to destroy it altogether?"

My desire to live did not allow me to jump down, but I thought that would have been a fitting reply to the train,

which was so proud of its speed. Also it would have been an apt reply to time.

For some reason, the train stopped abruptly and I got pushed backwards. Perhaps, there was no signal to proceed. I slammed the door as if to express my uncontrolled anger. Then I came back to the compartment and muttered, "I have nothing to do with whether you halt or not. You have anyway taught me a good lesson. Thank you. But I hope to give you a fitting reply some day. There is no need for me to commit suicide."

As soon as I was back in the compartment, my eyes fell on the old man sleeping in the lower berth. Not only was he enjoying a divine sleep, he was also smiling, as if experiencing a pleasant dream. I got annoyed. How can a man deceive himself like this ?

I am not at all curious to know why you are smiling. Whatever the reason may be, this smile is meaningless. No trace of happiness would be left with you now. Everything is gone. It is now time only to wait for the unmentionable. Therefore, you should keep your eyes shut, whether asleep or awake. You may call it meditation, but its basis is the state above consciousness. Forget whatever is left in your memory. There lies peace. You must have understood that time has by now snatched away whatever it had given you earlier. The naked old man is to be thrown into the sea. Only time knows when and where. Still you are smiling ! Oh God !

As if following the line of my thoughts, the old man opened his eyes and looked at me. And again he smiled

benignly, as if he were extremely glad to see me. Then he said, "Thank God, you are back. Where did you disappear for so long? Anyway, it is good that you are here. I don't have to worry any more." Then he pulled out a box from under the seat and opened it. I thought he was a bit off his head, as often happens in old age.

Then he held out a packet wrapped in paper to my hand and said, "Please take this. I had kept it specially for you. When I saw you getting into the compartment, I had marked for you. Thereafter you disappeared. This is the last packet with me. Now I feel relieved."

Seeing my perplexed look, he laughed aloud. Then he told me by way of explaining to a clueless boy, "Don't you know what is it? This is the Mahaprasad* of the Thakurji – dry Mahaprasad.....".

I had no option but to accept the packet after touching it on my forehead. That was expected of me.

He continued, "I am coming back from Puri. I hail from Chhatisgarh. My name is Sukhram Tiwari. Every year, I visit Puri at this time of the year to see the Thakurji decked in gold, and bring along a lot of dry Mahaprasad for distribution. I offer packets to whosoever I find near me - of course if he has no objection. When I reach home, nothing is left with me. What is the need, anyway?"

"Don't you require Mahaprasad at home?"

Now, the old man laughed louder and said, "Who said

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* Mahaprasad is the cooked rice offered to Lord Jagannath.

it is not required? But who is there at home? Some have gone to the other world and others live in distant places. Only I am left. I don't need it. I have seen Thakurji face to face and have spoken to Him. He is always with me. If I don't offer my dal and roti to him first, can I eat ? I go to the temple of the Lord every year so that I can see His face more closely. That's different....."

As he said this, his face glowed suddenly, "But, do you know that the Lord has saved me from this inconvenience of travel in my old age? He has pulled me closer to Him. I have now arranged for my accommodation at Puri.* I shall stay there till my last days...."

I kept nodding my head as if to congratulate him his good fortune. I was surprised to see his face continuing to glow. What is that intense happiness, in anticipation of which the face of an old man can glow and look so beautiful ?

He continued to ensure I must know some essential facts, "Do you know ? The packet that I gave you is the last packet of my current pilgrimage and also the last part of a ritual of the last ten years. From now on, I shall be inside the temple premises throughout the day and would partake of the Mahaprasad. There would be no need to distribute packets of the same?"

"I see," I said and touched the packet to my forehead again. Every last word has some significance. No, there was no concealed sarcasm in the words of the old man, I told myself. I must admit that after listening to the devout old

* Puri is the city where the temple of Thakurji is located.

man, my mind was filled with a feeling of compassionate devotion. Was it not an example of intense self-deception - the incidents of Thakurji talking to him and other things.....?

This appeared to be a reply to the pranks of the speeding train. "Where time takes me is immaterial. Thakurji is intimately connected with me. The flag that flutters on the Nilachakra is also the flag of my life. What do I fear? No time or supertime can do anything to me."

"Great !" I thought to myself and switched off the light to go to sleep. I don't know when the old man switched off his light and went to sleep. However, before going to sleep, I reminded myself, "I also want to give a befitting reply to time. Otherwise I will not be at peace with myself. But not like this, certainly not like this. There may be a whiff of self-deception, but that will not be so clear and evident. It will be a respectable answer based on intellect and knowledge."

I could fully understand what pleasant dreams he must be seeing at that time. He must be seeing his Thakurji and the great times that the Lord would be planning for him after he comes to stay in Puri.

I did not have any further conversation with the old man till I got down at my station the next day and bade him farewell. This was because I was busy with two other co-passengers. He was also busy throughout the day humming devotional songs. He did not appear to have any contact with the outside world.

Next day, at three in the afternoon, I took leave of my co-passengers at my station. You may be wondering as to

what I was doing from early morning when I woke up to the time when I got down. Was I preparing a list of grievances against the arrogance of the train and time? Or was it a list of fitting replies?

No sir, I did not get any opportunity to do that. Of course, I did not go and stand at the open door holding its railing and look at the moving landscape. That passion had been extinguished last night. But could I pass the time sitting in my berth and reading some books or magazine? I couldn't, because two passengers, supposed to be husband and wife got down from the upper berths, putting me into inconvenience.

The two sat side by side on seats opposite mine and next to the old man singing devotional songs. When there was enough space, why did they not sit face to face instead of sitting side by side? First I thought it was natural for husbands and wives to sit like that, irrespective of their age. But afterward's I realized that they sat side by side not out of love but to be able to quàrrel with each other. I could see that both were arguing on various topics. They were quite excited. They did not care about what their co-passengers like the bhajan–singing old man or the young man of their son's age would think.

Alas ! Time has finally landed you in such a situation. You had been a young man and a young woman once and had enjoyed each other's company in a park. Even if it was not the bench covered with a fallen shefali flowers, it could be in the lonely backyard of the house in the hot afternoon or on a tank bund. Thoùgh I was turning the pages of a magazine, I was smiling sympathetically at them. Also, I was

glancing at them from time to time from the corner of my eyes.

After some time, I felt that their conversation became relaxed. I could see that they were whispering to each other – perhaps exchanging some marital secrets. What is the matter ? Why this sudden change?

I tried to suppress my curiosity. Why should I bother myself, I reasoned. But I couldn't. They were also looking at me discreetly, and then looking at each other. I had no other go but to turn on my side and lie flat on the berth with my back to them. Then I tried to emmerse myself in the magazine, but to no avail. I couldn't comprehend which film star was the subject of the love story I was reading.

The train stopped at some station. I had to get down for a cup of tea. I was just going to order for a cup from the vendor when I heard the gentleman ordering three cups of tea. When I looked at the old man, he declined by shaking his head. Then I smilingly said "Thanks" to the gentleman. It was the minimum that courtesy demanded.

But that was not the end of the story. In fact, that was just the beginning. When I took out my wallet to pay the vendor, he forbade me waving his hand and saying "Please". His wife also shook her head. I was more surprised by the lady's imploring rather than the "Please" of the gentleman. I felt small. Therefore, I did not insist on paying and put my wallet back into my pocket.

I heard the the gentleman saying, "Where are you going, son?"

The question was not unusual, but why this tone of familiarity? The old man had addressed me in a formal way but why is this gentleman calling me "Son"? On what authority?

That I was a bit non-plussed is to understate the matter. A slight trace of disgust might have appeared on my face. However, I quickly stated my destination.

I should have been upset by the type of questions that were then put to me by both – questions regarding my name, my village, my educational qualifications, my age etc., etc. This is what is called unwarranted interference. Even if I am much younger, I have some self-respect and I cannot tolerate such interrogation. But I couldn't bring myself to say something like that – not because I am timid, but because I couldn't face the large tearful eyes of the lady and the choked voice of the gentleman. I did not have the courage to face such unexpected and intense emotion.

Finally, they said in a faltering voice – "Son, you look exactly like our Paru – the very same features, exactly the same smile and the same looks that make us feel we have regained our lost world.... Two years ago, the boy left us alone at such a tender age...."

Can one resist such sentiments? Or can one accept it easily? The truth is that I couldn't face it at all. I felt shy and gave an uncomprehending smile. I talked about various other things. But I couldn't extricate myself from the bondage of grieving parenthood.

Perhaps I did not want to extricate myself. It is true that my own loving parents are alive. But I just gained another set of parents and I could lessen their sorrow to some extent, without any exertion on my part. Is this not a great opportunity?

I couldn't hold back any personal information from them in the next two or three hours, before I had lunch with them. I even told them about the real purpose of my visit – that I was going to meet my beloved, Alaka. She has called me to talk to her on some urgent matter. From what I can gather from her letter, she is going to be my wife. There is no objection or opposition from any side.

Before I could finish, the gentleman said, "Really? Paru was also to marry after two months. Everything was settled...." Then he made a request :

"Son, will you do us a favour ? Can we see our daughter-in-law's face once?"

Daughter-in-law? Is it not enough that you got back your son? You also want to see the face of his would-be wife? Wonderful! Then it came to my mind that this is also a reply that would shame time : that you cannot do anything to me; I shall somehow get an opportunity to regain what I have lost; and I shall take full advantage of that situation. Look, I have found the son you had snatched away; also my would-be daughter-in-law.

I took the address of my "new" parents and assured them that their "son" and "his wife" would visit them soon after the marriage. And they would touch their feet and seek their blessings.

Between the devout old man and the never-say-die couple, whose self-deception was more creative and more enchanting? I groped for an answer, but then I told myself again that my reply might not be beautiful, but would certainly not be ridiculous. There would be some dignity in that – both of intellect and of knowledge.

When I got down from the train, I did not look upon train as an enmy any more. I had got new parents. Also, I didn't want to lessen the significance of the "last" packet of Mahaprasad that I got from the old man. It would not have been fair.

Translated by Subhash C. Khuntia

Apocalypse

Prativa Ray

If we lose all our hair do we get rid of our bald head?

When one lost forty-two members of his family does he put an end to his life?

As life is dear to every one, man continues to live, even when he loses everything; even though the act of living is far more painful than death.

One can easily notice the fall of a leaf or a flower or the breaking of a branch in a tree. Everyone can see that the tree has become a stump. But nobody notices the sudden death of man's hopes and the destruction of his future. That is a man's lot.

Everyone in Erasama had felt the whiplash of the cyclone, and nobody could escape the ruin wrought by the raging sea.

No one knew who lost whom and how much, and none had the time to keep count of all these. All were sunk in their own misery. It, therefore, came as no surprise when Jagan Behera lost fortytwo members of his family and still felt the pangs of hunger, the lashing of rain and sleepiness in his naked rain drenched eyes. Jagan was not alone in his misery; everyone in this village had lost someone or the other and received relief. What is known as relief kitchen was once derogatorily called "chatra" during the great famine in the nineteenth century and receiving food there made one lose one's caste.

But, on that day, all caste barriers had disappeared in the scramble before the free kitchen. Balu, the priest; Dhobei, the fisherman, Shaikh Razak and all other villagers forgot their caste and religion and formed a single line of hungry people. In spite of his personal sufferings, Jagan was wondering how calamity had levelled society and how everybody seemed to sail in the same boat. It appeared as if the calamity was ushering in an egalitarian world, at least in this village nestling close to river Devi. From now on, there would be no untouchable living outside the village under a thatched roof and no more would he look at the deity in the temple from a distance and curse his mean birth; nor would he have to carry the nightsoil of upper caste people to eke out a living. The sea had erased all the ridges separating plots of land and from now on, all would till the same piece of land, reap the harvest and live as one big family. In this land, no one would go without food, as fate had rendered all of them equal.

Anandamargis cremated heaps and heaps of dead bodies pouring petrol and kerosene on them. Sometimes, they even

used discarded motor tyres for this purpose. They had no time for funeral rites. This was the truth the apocalypse had brought home. Everyone's eyes had opened to a new revelation. Why should there be any discrimination ? A dead tree has some value, but the dead body of a man only pollutes the air. That is why human carcasses were burnt while the wood from dead trees were stored in godowns for future use. The dead were gone for ever ; at least people, who escaped the clutches of death, should live like human beings.

But why was Jagan so thoughtful when no one he could call his own, survived the devastation. May be, after realising that he was alive after so many had been swallowed up by the sea, he should have put an end to his own life. Already he had lived for too long. God alone knows why the surging sea spared him ? When he was on the verge of giving up his life a ten year old Brahmin boy, Gangu, got him entangled in human bondage. When he had come to his senses he found Gangu clinging to his body. When he wanted to lift his hand, the pain was unbearable, for his palms had been stripped of flesh. Then he remembered his desperate and selfish struggle to live. When he found Gangu alive, he never wanted to die as if Gangu had cast a spell on him.

Jagan still remembered that day, when he had gone to the priest's house for plucking coconuts. He had taken with him, two of his grandsons - Puria and Jhatua. The children wanted Jagan to get them two myna chicks. But Jagan would not oblige them. He did not want the chicks to fall into the cruel did hands of these children. Even though the children knew grandpa's mind, they still pestered Jagan to take them along to the priests' house. The lady of the house gave these

children some sweetmeats, rice and dal or puffed or beaten rice. Gangu sometimes used to share a piece of chocolate or broken toy with them. All day long, Jagan worked on the coconut trees. The radio had warned about a cyclone. So the priest wanted to gather all his coconuts. Cyclone is a part of life in this village, like the countless festivals. As cyclones came every year, nobody took the warning seriously. Many thought it to be part of the campaign for the coming election. "Let the cyclone come; it is not going to turn the world upside down. "Why worry so early ?" many reasoned.

It was twilight when Jagan was ready to leave for home. The priest said , "It appears the cyclone is coming and everybody is advised to take shelter on high ground. Why , like a fool, are you planning to go back to your hut with these two kids ? Spend the night in the cowshed and, early tomorrow morning, you could pluck coconuts from one or two trees."

"How can I stay away from my family at a time like this ? They must be getting panicky. Let me go and bring everybody here. Our neighborhood is in a low lying area and people were saying the sea would drown our land."

The priest smiled and said, "I have seen many such cyclones. I have been watching this sea for ages. As I have put fetters on the sea, she will not surge into this village. Whenever the sea had extended his hands to this village, I have pushed it back with the power of my magic spell. The sea loves to live with us. Have you ever heard of the sea sweeping hamlets away ? As long as Balu Panda of Kankana village is alive the sea can never harm any one."

Jagan felt his heart beat like a drum. The priest was mocking at the sea. God knows what will come to pass. Will the sea God brook such arrogance ? But no one talks back to a rich man. Jagan hurriedly walked towards his low roofed cottage at one end of the village. By mid-night, the rain began to pour and, like flocks of sheep being driven to the slaughter house, Jagan's family went to the priest's house and took shelter in the cow shed, built on raised place of ground. The cowshed was a much safer place than their thatched cottage. The priest's pucca building was on still higher ground. Being untouchables, they did not dare climb the verandah of the main building. All through the night, they watched the rain fall in torrents on the cowshed. The dark clouds stayed put in the sky. Balu Panda, as he brushed his teeth with tobacco paste, boasted, "Did you see, Jagan, how my spell made the cyclone inactive. Now your family can safely return home, but you may stay back for a while and if the cyclone subsides, you can pluck coconuts from a few trees."

"Is he a priest or a butcher ? When a death-dealing wind is blowing from all directions, all he has time for are his coconuts. Since last night the family had been tormented by ceaseless rain, thought Jagan and felt as if he heard a earth-shattering boom. For a moment it seemed as if the sky came crashing down on the earth? Something was advancing like a dark cloud from where the Hansua river drains into the sea. And there was a a great commotion. Some climbed trees and others climbed thatched roofs. The fear of imminent death turned everybody into adept tree climbers. Jagan did not know when he had climbed one. Claspsing his neck, Gangu hung from his back and two of his grandchildren clung to his

shoulders. Jagan had no time to look around and see how cows, men, women and houses were swept away by the deluge. His legs were entangled in broken branches of the tree and he felt he was being dragged downwards. He soon lost his grip on the trunk of the tree and hung from a branch. He could feel the leaden weight of unconscious Gangu on his back. The burden of his grandchildren on his shoulders made him shift them slightly with his hands, but he now felt a searing pain on his palms and the pain was so intense that he felt as if his palms had been cut into pieces. The fearsome sea below would swallow all if he loosened his grip. It seemed as if the end of Kaliyug was at hand. But no one gives up without a struggle. The water showed no signs of receding and threatened to engulf them. If both his hands had gone limp, he would have left everything to fate. Gangu had encircled his neck like a snake, sucking away his life. Jhatua and Puria were clinging on to both his arms, pleadings, 'Please don't leave us grandpa'. Jhatua was heavier and Jagan's right hand was unable to hold him for long. Death is less painful than raw flesh being scraped from the bone. He could not help releasing his right hand, and, at last, like a broken branch of a tree, his right hand dangled in mid air. With successive jerks, he abandoned his two grandsons to the mercy of the sea and within minutes Jhatua and Puria were dragged by the waves. Now, only Gangu hung onto him like a leech. The pain in his hands subsided and the water also began to recede. Jagan started descending along with Gangu into the water below. There was no strength left in his arms and legs. They crashed into the water. Fortunately for them, the roof of a cottage came floating by and they both fell on it and kept drifting.

The bed of straw gave Jagan some comfort. When he opened his eyes, he found himself floating near Erasama. People rescued Gangu and Jagan and they became part a of the large famished crowd desperately looking for food.

Balu Panda felt boundless gratitude to Jagan. Balu had also lost a great deal, during the calamity, but his family had survived after taking shelter in a temple. He had reconciled himself to the loss of Gangu. Jagan received praise from all for having saved Gangu even at the cost of the lives of his own two grand children. Wiping his tears, Balu embraced Jagan and said, "Perhaps you were my brother in my last birth. You did what no one else could do. Who is capable of such a great sacrifice ? Your name will never be erased from the memory of people in Erasama. How shall I repay you, when we are all now so poor. I will remain indebted to you in this life and in the others to come."

"Let Balu Panda's wish not come true. I can't bear being his tenant in my next birth." thought Jagan.

The raging sea had swallowed up all the forty two members of Jagan's extended family : four sons, five daughters, fathers, brothers, sisters, nephews, nieces, grandsons and grand daughters. All had lost some near and dear ones, and Jagan was no exception. But the way Jagan threw his two grandsons into the mouth of the all- devouring sea kept haunting him. He felt as if he had strangled his two grand children to save himself, and he thought he was no better than a murderer. He would have also sacrificed Gangu if he had clung to his shoulder. Jagan was not as courageous, selfless and virtuous as he was made out to be. He was a murderer, who could

not only pluck coconuts from trees, but could butcher human beings as well. People had failed to see through him. But everyone heaped praise on him. All their good words added insult to his never-to-heal injury. How could he willingly leave those two innocent children in the mouth of death ? They were his own flesh and blood, after all. He could have certainly exerted himself a little more. The children could have escaped the clutches of death. The words of those children 'grandpa ! grandpa !' kept ringing in his ears. Jagan could neither live nor end his life. He felt as if everybody whispered behind him, 'That murderer Jagan stands on the corpses of his grandsons and swims in a river of blood.' He gave half of whatever relief material he received to Gangu.

Jagan was to receive a large sum of money, seventy five thousand rupees for the death of each family member. With so many deaths in his family, Jagan found it difficult to calculate the huge amount of compensation he would receive and he had no idea what he was going to do with all this money. If his two grandsons were alive, this money would have had some meaning. So he decided to give half of his compensation money to Gangu and the other half he would spend for the scores of orphans in the village. Many had already smelt the bounty Jagan was going to receive, and slowly they had started buzzing around him.

Jagan knew how selfish man was and if , at least, one of his sons or grandsons were alive today, he would not have parted with a single pie to anybody. When people called him benevolent , it mocked his conscience.

Balu Panda had called him and wanted him to clean the backyard. But Jagan said no. He had no strength left in him. He

told the priest of his reluctance to work. He no longer feared the priest as he used to. The priest got annoyed and said, "Jagan ! Just because you happen to have saved my grandson, you don't cease to be my tenant. I agree you went through a terrible experience. You have sat with a heavy heart for long six months. Now you must work. What do you think you are. The rumour of getting lot of compensation has turned your head. You were not like this in the past."

Jagan chose to keep quiet; he also thought he was not bound to give any reply. He returned to his dilapidated cottage. He started thinking about the compensation he was going to receive . He had second thoughts about giving part of it to Gangu. He was not sure whom he should give the money when nobody was dependable.

He thought he should turn to God.

In the thin darkness of the evening, he climbed the front verandah of the temple. If God failed to give him a clear direction he would not touch the money from the Government. He had no need for it.

Balu Panda was present in the temple to offer evening worship to God, and when he noticed Jagan climbing onto the verandah of the temple he roared, "Stop ! Don't take one step more. For sins committed by people like you, the sea wiped out this village. Still you are bent upon committing yet another sin. Don't you know your presence will pollute the temple. Money will not make a Chamar a Bramhin". Three or four Brahmins lunged at him. Jagan looked at all the Brahmins from the bottom-most step of the flight of steps leading to the temple. These Brahmins had once taken food sitting close

beside him in a community kitchen and jostled with him to take relief materials. These Brahmins had now engaged in prawn farming forgetting all about purity and pollution. And Balu Panda had forgotten the debt he owed to Jagan.

Jagan was not allowed a glimpse of the deity in the temple. He only murmured, "God ! Only a cyclone had hit the area but as apocalypse has not. Hence, true equality between man and man has not been established. We may have to wait for the ultimate destruction to visit us, sometime in future".

Translated by Arun Pratap Das

Different Strokes

Paresh Kumar Patanaik

Three months and ten days after her marriage, Sulata entered Subhankar's studio and looked intently at all his paintings, one by one. She was amazed. She felt happy and proud. She understood a bit. And at the same time, could not comprehend quite a bit. In the end, she stopped at one. She looked at it again and again, and a feeling of deep unease seized her. She felt embarrassed and embarrassment gave way to a feeling of shock.

"Who is she?" she demanded.

Subhankar was absentminded. He looked at Sulata sideways and then looked at the painting. It was the portrait of a woman in the nude. Subhankar had half-expected this to happen.

"Must be somebody", he replied.

But Sulata was not ready to take this as matter of course answer.

"Who is that 'somebody'? She must be having a name and an address", she asked.

"How do I know?" said Subhankar.

"But you have sketched her, haven't you ?"

"Yes"

"So how come you don't know her?"

"She is just a model. How do I know about her whereabouts?"

"Why don't you? She must have come from somewhere?"

"Yes. She did. One of my friends had brought her here."

"And you sketched her without knowing who she was ?"

"These things do not concern me. My business was only to sketch her. "

"Were you not curious?"

"No. I was not. Even if I were, how could I guarantee that the model will reveal her correct identity?"

"How many times did she come here ?"

"Probably thrice. O' yes! I remember now. She had come for three sittings and left after collecting her payment. The painting was completed days after she left. So there was no need for her to come again."

"Who is that 'friend' of yours?"

"Friend? Which friend? He was a broker. He arranges for models and gets his commission."

"Why do you paint such obscene sketches?"

"Not obscene sketches. Call them 'nudes'".

"Hmm! Okay nudes"

"Because I can paint nudes. And can paint them well. These sell swell. And they bring me money."

"Goodness!" Sulata murmured to herself.

Sulata's husband was a painter. And Sulata knew about his profession before her marriage. She was indeed well aware of it. But she thought paintings could only be of sunsets over the banks of a river or beggars begging in a street. Or else, they could have crows, cranes... or mangoes and papaya as their subject matter. Her father had told her that painters now-a-days made good money and given her the examples of M. F. Hussain and Manjit Bawa, who were so rich and so famous. Her mother had said, "The boy may not be in service, but he is earning well. Kamal bhai who had arranged this match, recommended him saying that, although he was an artist, he did not have any vices. Being a painter, he is slightly absent minded and is a bit eccentric. That is all !

Sulata, who was quite prepared for the wedding, had resolved to smooth out all his eccentricities.

But what she saw no instance of eccentric behaviour. This was sacrilege !

Their marriage was only three months and ten days' old. The initial excitement had not died down yet .

That night, when Subhankar reached out to her, Sulata said, "I am not feeling well." Subhankar did not pester her. He went to sleep. But Sulata felt restless. Two days later, she came to the studio again and started dusting the place. The

room was dirty. Tubes of Paint and canvases littered the place. Kerosene and turpentine bottles, pieces of rags, scraps of paper with absurd sketches lay scattered on the floor.

Sulata rearranged everything.

Then she sat next to him. Subhankar was absent minded. And quiet. Sulata went up to him and said,

"Tell me something more about the model," she cajoled him.

"What can I say?" he asked.

"Anything".

"I told you once I don't know her name nor her address."

"That is not what I want to know. How did she come here? What did she do here? What conversation did both of you have?"

"The broker brought her here. And I asked her to sit and pose. And then she followed my instructions."

"Did you ask her to remove her clothes or she took them off herself?"

"I asked her to".

"Didn't she object?"

"Why should she?"

"Out of shyness or embarrassment."

"Why should she feel shy ? She came prepared to do the job she had to do, and I knew what I had to do."

Just the same way like you knew what you had to do when you married me, and I knew what I had to, when I married you ! thought Sulata to herself.

"Hmm! Then what did you do?"

"I sketched her on a canvas."

"Really! The broker was present?"

"No. He had left after taking his dues."

"That means the two of you were alone in the studio?"

"Yes".

"Didn't you feel awkward ?"

"This is my profession, after all."

"Who taught the model to pose this way?"

"Me, who else!"

"The alignment of the face, bust, etc ?"

"Yes. Yes."

"You stood near the stand, or you came close to her to instruct her?" asked Sulata.

Subhankar felt as if he was being grilled by the police. Nevertheless, he thought he should be frank with his wife. He said, "Near the stand. But if she could not follow my instructions, I had to go near her and direct her, or at times, positioned her myself".

"Positioned her yourself ? What does that mean ? Did you actually touch her?" asked Sulata.

Subhankar answered indifferently, "Yes I did".

Sulata was shocked, and exclaimed, "How dangerous !"

That night Sulata rang up her mother. She cried and complained that her marriage was doomed. Her mother got confused and and asked her, "What is the matter ?"

Sulata said in a choked voice, "Why at all did you get me married to this person ?"

Her mother asked her impatiently, "Why ? What happened?"

"You only know that he paints, but do you know what he paints? Maa, what do I do now! I am shocked and disturbed by what I have seen. Do you know he sketches only nude women ! And he claims that it is his profession."

Her mother reassured her saying, "All right, don't worry. I will talk to your father."

After a short while, Sulata's father rang her. He consoled her and tried to make her see reason. To clinch the matter, he said, "Now you are his wife, and he is your husband. Henceforth you have to look after your home. In case you don't want him to paint the kind of pictures you dislike, persuade him to see things from your point of view."

"He says he can't give up painting nudes", Sulata said. Her father advised her saying, "Of course, he won't. But whatever is to be done has to be done by you. Anyway, painting is his profession. Whatever money and name he has earned for himself is through his paintings only. So, it is not proper to object to his paintings. Managing your marital life is your responsibility now." He said such things as though his duties to her daughter had come to an end after getting her married !

Sulata felt adrift in mid-sea, weighed down by the burden of a life, she found unacceptable. She had to manage on her own. That day, Sulata cried the whole night. After shedding a lot of tears, she had resolved by the morning to take control of the situation.

The next day in the morning, she announced her decision to Subhankar.

"I will pose for you", she announced.

Subhankar burst into laughter.

"Why are you laughing? From now on, no other woman will enter this room. Enough of everything! Now, I will pose for you", she said firmly.

Subhankar looked helpless.

:"Now look here. You do your job and let me do mine. Your role is to look after the household. Just mind that", he said.

Sulata laughed sarcastically.

"Very good! I will cook for you, bear your children, and keep the house for you. And you will get outsiders to model for you?" she said.

"Why are you interfering with my work?" Subhankar said, annoyed.

Sulata shot back, "I am going to interfere with everything you do. I am your wife, after all. I have to do with everything that concerns you because I am married to you. I will be your model too. And from now on, you will take only me for all your sketches."

"This is not how it is done. How to sketch and whom to take as a model for sketching is a serious matter. It is a matter relating to creativity, fantasy, imagination and emotion. You can't have a right on all these", Subhankar explained.

Sulata was reduced to tears. "So I have no right over this house nor on my husband", she asked.

Subhankar tried to make her understand, saying, "Yes as a wife you have a right over this house, over me and over everything else. But not over an artist and his creativity".

Sulata hit back angrily, "Just because you are an artist, you can get away with everything? You think you have earned a licence to do anything you want to just because you are an artist? This won't do".

Subhankar tried hard to make her understand but failed.

That night, Sulata switched on all the lights and made the bedroom brightly lit. When Subhankar wished to switch off the lights, she objected. Closing all the doors and windows tightly, she pretended to play the role of a seductress. "Probably in the dark, I get lost. You can touch me but can't feel me; you can see me, but can't observe me", she said.

"How do you know? Have you felt anything lacking in the way I treat you ?" Subhankar asked.

"Yes I have. You have seen so many female bodies that I don't interest you. Whatever you are doing is purely mechanical", she said.

"Yes I have seen many nude female bodies, but only as an artist and not as a man. I never lust after them. Why are you confusing these two different points of view ? An artist is not a male", he said.

Sulata screamed, "An artist is not a man, then what is he? An eunuch? I find in all your paintings a male's perspective. You are dissecting female bodies like this! Isn't this a man's way of looking at things?"

"Probably me being a man influences my creativity. But an artist has no gender. He is beyond all this", he tried to explain.

Sulata, who was burning with anger, jealousy and resentment, turned aggressive in the brightly lit room. She was shaking. She began disrobing herself and like a blooming flower, her well-sculpted figure emerged from the wraps of her clothes. Sulata faced him boldly and asked, "Am I ugly? Don't I possess a figure which meets your criteria? Am I not fit to pose for your sketches?"

Subhankar switched off the lights.

"Right now I am only a man. Nothing else", he said. When Subhankar tried to embrace her, Sulata said tauntingly, "At times you are a man, and at times you are an artist! Do you have a definition for each of these roles?"

Panting heavily and completly bathed in perspiration, Subhankar said, "No there are no such roles".

After all these arguments finally came to an end, Subhankar said, cooling himself under the fan, "Come to the studio tomorrow".

Sulata now remarked sarcastically, "So this is how you choose your models?"

Goodness ! What a bickering woman ! Arguing over everything !

Subhanakar refused to say anything. He was too tired.

The next day, Sulata posed in the nude in the studio like a professional model. The same Sulata who always disliked to shed her clothes even in bed, who hated to be seen naked with the lights on, and who refused intimacies in daytime, now posed as a model without the least bit of embarrassment. Subhankar did not direct her to pose in any particular way.

He did not even go near her. He was scared that the model Sulata will return to her argumentative wifely self again and would compare herself with the anonymous models.

But this did not escape Sulata's notice.

When Subhankar began to draw outlines on his canvass, Sulata asked, "Why have you not told me how to pose, or even touched me? You have not said anything about the lights and shades. You are not commenting on anything....".

Subhankar said, "Everything is okay".

"No, everything is not okay. Actually you cannot accept me as a model", Sulata argued.

Subhankar gave a hollow laugh and said, "Please don't spoil my mood".

Sulata had heard that artists were a moody lot. So she left the matter at that. After a few days of marriage Subhankar had said that he was not getting the mood to paint. So now when Sulata saw him sketching, she was quite pleased.

After the sitting was over, Sulata had asked, "How long will it take to complete the painting?"

"Can't say", he replied.

"Can I have a look at it now?"

"No."

"Why?"

"Then it will be difficult to complete it."

"Why?"

"That is the way things are."

Sulata kept quiet. Creativity is a mystery. It is beyond arguments. Artists are next to God. One does not argue with them. God also works that way. After he creates a human being, he brings him or her out to the world. A painting or any creative work cannot be exhibited mid-way. Artists are a moody lot; they perform only when they wish to. One can't bargain with them. Sulata felt exhausted after this heavy work of philosophising.

Work on the portraits took a fortnight. After posing unabashedly and holding her eagerness to take a look at the sketches in check, she was finally told that the painting was finished.

"Can I have a look at it now?" Sulata asked. Subhankar said "she could."

"But you are my only model who got an opportunity to have a look at the completed painting", he added.

Sulata received a jolt when she saw the painting. She felt defeated, agitated, disgusted and angry, she screamed, "Is this my picture?"

Subhankar said nonchalantly, "Of course, it is."

"But it does not look like me at all?"

"This is not a photograph that it will be a replica of the subject. This is modern art."

"And why did I trouble myself to pose so shamelessly?"

"That is how you looked to the artist."

"That means I look like this?"

"Not to me. But to the artist."

Sulata scrutinised the painting. A woman's figure had come alive on the canvass. Her eyes were bright. A sensuous, taut body. Parted lips. Looked as though she would leap out of the frame of the canvas. An unnamed lust and desire animated the canvas.

No! Not a bad painting ! But sadly the painting did not reflect her. Alas! All these days waiting and hard work had to end like this ?

Suddenly she remembered, she had seen this woman in the picture somewhere. It strike her like a thunderbolt. And the face flashed before her eyes. She could recollect the face of the washerwoman staying down the lane. She used to fan the iron, when her husband pressed clothes in the roadside cabin near their hut. O Yes ! Indeed ! This is she !

Sulata challenged Subhankar, "What if I say I know the model !"

Subhankar gave a start, and asked, "Who is she ?"

"The washer-woman staying down this lane", Sulata said.

"Which one? I have not seen any washer woman!" Subhankar said

Sulata scoffed at him, saying "You haven't ? Then how could you paint a vivid sketch of her? And here I am posing in the nude in your studio like a fool! You are seeing something and sketching something else. You are seeing somebody and thinking of someone else! What sort of an artist are you! This is not an artist's attitude! This is immorality! Improper! Sacrilegious!"

Sulata seethed with rage.

Subhankar, being a reserved person, did not react. He kept quiet.

In the end Sulata declared, "But I won't give up. You will have to sketch me, and only me ."

The canvas was rolled out again and Sulata posed once more.

Subhankar's first, second, third and fourth attempts at doing a portrait of Sulata failed.

Instead of Sulata, on his canvas appeared the pictures of a sick beggar woman, a caveman, a monkey and, lastly, a heap of bricks.

Translated by Monalisa Jena

Virtual Love

Jagadish Mohanty

The Address of Love

Aditya loves Binodini. But Aditya does not like her name. Oriyas do not know how to name their children. They prefer old-fashioned names like Mandakini or Pankajini. Aditya has rechristened Binodini Rituparna. But is there any place in Bhubaneswar to express one's love? Indira Gandhi Park teems with people. At Baramunda bus stand, the touts will pester you to buy a bus ticket to Sambalpur or Rourkela. Khandagiri has too many monkeys. At Dhauligiri Hill? People around will tease you.

Then where will the Adityas and Rituparnas express their love for each other ? Perhaps it will be some cybercafé in Shahid Nagar, where the availability of internet facility is doubtful, and where the computer is half the time found

hanging. There you could express your unadulterated love in exchange for twenty rupees in a cubicle two-and-half feet by three feet, made of plywood sheets.

Aditya all on a sudden, gives his love's address as adityarituparna@deadcyber.com.

Cyber lover

Aditya and I love the same girl. Her cyber-name is Julie. For her, both of us are one and our name is Shubhankar. Julie stays in Thiruvananthapuram. She is doing engineering in applied electronics in an engineering college. Shubhankar is in Durham City of North Carolina in America. He is in charge of the computer section of the university there. After doing a degree computer engineering from I.I.T. Kanpur and after working with I.B.M. for two years, he has been in America for the last one and a half years. Durham is a small city. North Carolina is an agricultural state. The plus point of Durham is its proximity to Washington and New York.

Hard economics is the reason behind two of us sharing Julie's love. It is not possible for each of us to spend twenty rupees per hour every day in the cybercafé. Besides, one has to spend extra on e-mail and printouts. Both of us first did our B.Sc. and then P.G.D.C.A. spending thirty thousand rupees each. Aditya then managed to become a Java programmer. This required thirty thousand rupees more. After receiving our certificates, we realized that certificates and diplomas meant nothing as far as employment opportunities were concerned. Then we tried hard to prepare for the entrance test for admission to M.C.A. in I.I.M.S., Gwalior. Aditya got through. I failed. One requires sixty thousand rupees to take admission

there. Aditya does not have that kind of money. Aditya's father has already spent so much money on Aditya for various courses and tests that Aditya can't bring himself to ask his father again for more money.

The two of us share a one-room rented house in Gajapatinagar, paying a monthly rent of? five hundred rupees. We eat meals twice a day in a restaurant run in a thatched hut. The meals cost five hundred rupees per head per month. Each of us requires at least two thousand rupees every month. Besides, Aditya has brought over one old Java motorcycle from his village. It consumes too much petrol and breaks down too often. Though the cyber café costs money, Aditya considers visiting it essential, much more than a meal in the hotel, a litre of petrol in the bike or a cigarette in the morning. This because, for him, cyberspace is a dream. One who has no dreams has nothing else. In the small square area bound by plywood partitions in the cyber café, one's personality gets transformed. We two metamorphose into Shubhankar, the computer engineer in America. Shubhankar has achieved everything possible in life through luck and merit. For him, flying from America to India paying sixty thousand rupees for an air ticket is no big deal. His new Hyundai car has developed problems; he is planning to sell it off at one-fourth the original price and buy new car. When he comes to India, he wants to visit Kerala to know more about Indian culture and will record the lifestyle of Kerala in a CD. He will open a website of his own. Everything is settled.

When we step outside the café, our personality gets transformed again. We open the lid of the petrol tank of the mobike and the the cigarette packet to find out how much of

life's fuel is left for the day. The soles of my shoes are cracked. Aditya has only two pairs of trousers and shirts. The hotel bills for the last month are still to be paid. We owe the cigarette vendor five hundred ten rupees and ninety paise.

I feel like a criminal, deceiving Julie in the cyber café. Is it good to play with the sentiments of any girl? Aditya said, there was nothing like sentiment. Who knows whether the girl is really studying engineering? May be she is a nurse. May be she is in some other town, not in Thiruvananthapuram. May be, she is playing a game with us, just as we are doing with her.

Even then, we go to the cyber café regularly and seek Julie's virtual friendship. Sometimes when she is not available, we feel disappointed. The cursor hits Julie's name again and again, but Julie does not appear. Sometimes, she leaves a message : " I have been waiting for the last one hour. Are you not in the mood, Yankee boy?" She likes to call Shubhankar by that name. She does not know that "Yankee boy" was used in America as a derogatory term.

Julie has comes to the cyber café at five in the evening so that it would be morning in North Carolina at that time. Shubhankar goes up in the morning, takes a cup of tea and sits down in front of the computer to chat with Julie. Julie chats a lot – about her parents, friends, and the importance of elephants in Kerala. We don't talk about love, but we spend one hour every day on Julie. Julie promised to send her photo by e-mail.

One day, Aditya typed on the monitor – "Your photo must be beautiful. I am sure, it would look sexy". In reply,

she wrote - "Oh, you naughty boy!" Aditya took this for her consent. But I could see clearly as daylight that the consequences of this play-acting would be disastrous. Suppose Julie sent her photo. In return, she would ask for Shubhankar's photo. Where shall we get that from ? Aditya had a solution ready at hand. His friend Arindam is a sub-editor in an Oriya newspaper. Aditya had seen a bunch of photographs with him. Such photos generally end up in the dustbin. "We shall get one of those", Aditya said. To support his proposal, Aditya said, "Look, you resemble an African gorilla. You don't have a photogenic figure. Of course, I am good-looking and photogenic. But you will feel bad if we send my photo. It would be better to collect one from Arindam". I said, "Will it be good idea to deceive her like this, Aditya?" Aditya laughed and said, "Friend, what is the guarantee that Julie will send her own photo?"

Characteristics of a Lover

Binodini's father is a highly placed government official. There is a website listing the names of the most corrupt officers of the country. He holds fifteenth rank in that list. His house is a stone's throw from A.G. square, Capital hospital, Suchana Bhavan, old bus-stand, the market building and the Raj Bhavan. Next to his house lies the headquarters of national political party. The Minister of State for Fisheries is one of his neighbours. Recently, a green-painted bamboo fence has come up in front of his house. You can find a white Ambassador Nova car parked in the portico of his house.

I have not seen Binodini's father. Aditya has. I have never been to Binodini's house. Aditya has. I have also not spoken

to Binodini's, brother who stuns residents of Bhubaneswar with his hoodless Impala car, run on gas. Of course, Aditya has spoken to him. He has also purchased biscuits for Binodini's dog from his meagre resources.

If you see Binodini, you cannot imagine that her father is such a high-ranking officer, nor that he ranks so high among the most corrupt officers in the country. No one can imagine after meeting Binodini that she has a brother looking like an MTV anchor or that she has a dog that has won prizes in dog-shows. She does not wear salwar kameez, but chooses to wear a cotton saree. She wears two bronze bangles on one wrist and a watch on the other. She puts on a thin chain round her the neck and small tubs on her ear lobes. She wears ordinary leather chappals. She never uses lipstick. She carries a small vanity bag or kerchief in her hand. Her extremely fair complexion makes it difficult to say whether she powders her face. Even though she is not fashionable, her deportment betrays her aristocratic background. Whenever I see Binodini, I feel Aditya is not at all suitable for her.

Aditya says that the love between him and Binodini is very tragic. All their time for romance get wasted because Binodini is a cry baby. She cries because her father takes bribe, because her brother is aping Nikhil of MTV, because Aditya is not getting a job, because Aditya smokes so many cigarettes. She sheds copious tears also because Orissa has to face so many calamities like floods, cyclones or droughts every year, and because God made Yukta Mookhey so tall that she is not able to get a break in a film. Aditya teases her saying that, in any crying competition, she would certainly walk away with the first prize.

Of course, Aditya must be exaggerating. I know Aditya well. I can't imagine that Binodini would be sobbing before Aditya, when alone. I can see her as a sympathetic and talented girl. Needless to say, I was quite influenced by Binodini's qualities, though I didn't like her name. I felt great respect for Binodini's capacity for love, which would probably make her leave her palatial home one day and to come to live with Aditya in his rented one-room house.

The Chemistry of love

We learnt from the web site that love was of six kinds. One is "rose", where love begins from physical attraction and ends in marriage. The second is "ludus" where love is like a game. There is no attachment, and such love wanes quickly. The third is "agape" which involves sacrifice. The fourth is "locus", which is unexpressed love. There are many wrong ideas and taboos associated with it though both want to see each other happy. The fifth type is "maniac" which leads to madness. If the person does not get the desired partner, he or she does not hesitate to commit murder or suicide. The sixth type of love is "pragma", where the person looks at the whole bio-data of the partner and tries to assess the qualities of the partner as if using a mathematical formula.

The love-related web site told us that love was completely a chemical and scientific phenomenon. A chemical called serotonin, which is secreted in our brain, encourages us to fall in love. Another chemical called endorphin stops us from falling in love. The website also informed us that the attitude of the lover was decided by the constitution of our chromosomes. For example, women who have a gene called

"freak I" in every ninth chromosome, fall in love with men who do not reciprocate their love. Such women also tend to fall for married men.

Both Aditya and I felt bad reading this as it showed that love and heart had nothing to do with each other. However the website provided one curious fact: those who love have unobstructed coronary arteries, and they live a healthier life and live longer. To substantiate this, it claimed that married men lived longer than the unmarried. Further, if a partner in a marriage dies, the other does not survive him long.

I am unsuccessful in love. The first reason is my looks, the second, my personality, the third – my unemployed status and the fourth– the mental and social condition of my family members. Even if I want to, I cannot hope to win the love of a girl like Binodini. But I felt sad about Binodini and Aditya, since Binodini was planning to venture into an unsafe and dark future with Aditya without any care for her father's wealth and status and risking her future. Such madness is called love. Can one accept that this is happening just because of the secretion of some chemicals? If this secretion is stopped or if the constitution of chromosomes is altered, will the nature of love change?

This pained me. Aditya was also very unhappy after reading what the webside had to say on the meaning of love. He withdrew into a shell for quite a few days.

Price of love

"How much do you think is the price of Binodini's love?" Aditya asked. The question shocked me. Can one put a price on love? It is an experience which one keeps

locked inside one's heart, like one keeps the feather of an unknown bird in a golden casket. One can sometimes open this casket to see the beautiful feather or to touch it soft freshness.

But Aditya came out with the answer, "Only one lakh rupees, do you understand? Of course, the price would have been much higher, but her father is a real miser. Besides, I did not have much time or patience. So I agreed to settle for one lakh rupees."

It was impossible for me to make sense of this riddle. He possibly understood my situation and suppressed his annoyance. He said, "Binodini's father came today and told me that Binodini's marriage had been arranged with an N.R.I. The funniest part is that the boy is a computer engineer and is in charge of the computer section of some university. Of course, I did not ask whether the boy's name was Shubhankar or whether he was at Duke University of Durham. Her father told me that Binodini was not at all willing to marry. He asked me to get out of Binodini's life. He was prepared to help me in my career and asked me the price of my love".

Do such things happen in reality ? They happen in films. Even there, the hero always tears up the blank cheque offered by the heroine's father, denies himself all material wealth and comfort and chooses a life of poverty. But Aditya said, "Look, had you got Binodini married to me, you would have spent at least five or six lakh rupees. Besides, one needs at least ten lakh rupees to build one's career. Please tell me how much you will pay. " The old man turned out to be a big miser. He said, "Don't judge me by appearances. The media

have unnecessarily defamed me. So many enquiry commissions and House Committees have investigated into my affairs, but none has found me guilty. Actually, I don't take bribes, and I am much poorer than my fellow officers. Even then, I shall do whatever I can to help build your career. Tell me how much you need".

"I could not decide how much to ask for. I should have asked for ten lakh, but could not gather the courage to do so. I had never before seen nor touched so much money. Now-a-days, people ordinarily win ten or fifteen lakh in TV game shows. Thirty to forty crore rupees are found under the beds or in the bathrooms of ministers. But I couldn't bring myself to ask for ten lakh. I asked for only five lakh. The old man said, 'Look, I am actually very poor. You don't know how much I have borrowed from the banks. To repay that, I may have to auction all my property. I can at best give you one lakh. Are you agreeable?'

I paused, "If not five, then please give me at least three". The old man got up. He said, 'I have brought a cheque for one lakh. Encash it, if you decide to forget Binodini. If you do not, you can return the cheque to me. Even if you don't return it, the cheque will become invalid after three months. But remember, if you accept it, you must leave this city, and forget Binodini." Aditya took an envelope out of his pocket and showed me the cheque. Then he asked for my advice. "What have you decided?" I asked. "I have decided to encash the cheque", he said coolly.

Binodini's face flashed across my mind's eye: a simple and straightforward, but smart and accomplished girl. I could

visualize her eyes swimming in tears. An intense pain gripped my heart. It seemed as if someone played the tune of a long-forgotten song, full of pathos. I was speechless.

Only four days were left for the last date of admission in the Computer Institute in Gwalior. Aditya would take two days to get there.

The parting

Aditya will leave for Gwalior tomorrow morning at nine by Utkal Express. He is all set to go. He has paid all his dues at the restaurant. He also paid for the cigarettes and rent for his one-room accommodation. The Java motorcycle presented a problem. I don't know how to ride a motorcycle. Gears are changed by hand in a scooter, but by feet in a motorcycle. Of course, I can learn to ride a motorcycle if I want to, but I don't have the money one needs to maintain a Java.

Aditya said that he would be leaving the Java for me to use but not to sell. After he leaves, it will be difficult for me to pay the rent for the house. I have to find someone to share it; otherwise I have to shift to some hostel. The Java will be a burden.

Another burden is Julie. He said, "I am leaving Julie to you. You will stay in touch with her." But continuing a relationship with Julie means twenty rupees per hour in the cybercafe. That is a luxury, I could ill afford. Aditya has been a friend for two to three years. He was like a shadow. Now it will be really difficult to live without him.

Aditya got berth No.36 in coach S-1 after bribing the booking clerk at the railway station. He lay down on the cot

on his return from the station and said, "What shall we do with this cot? I had bought it for two hundred rupees. You may sell it or give it to the new tenant who would share the room with you. Or if you give up this house, you can gift the cot to the owner."

"Will you forget Bhubaneswar? And me?" I asked. Aditya looked at me, placed his hand on my shoulder and said, "We are both adults. It is not good to be so sentimental."

"No. I cannot get rid of sentiments", I said. Aditya patted my shoulder and said, "Let us go to Puri to lighten your mood. We shall taste the kanika rice of the Anand Bazar in Jagannath temple. Whatever you may say, you can't find a delicacy like it anywhere else."

Fatigued Bedouin

Going to Puri was a pretext. Aditya wanted to get away from Bhubaneswar fast. His proposal was to go to Puri and stay there overnight in a lodge. Next day morning, we would board the Utkal express from there. I would get down at Bhubaneswar. He would continue the journey to Gwalior.

May be, Aditya did not have the courage to face Binodini. If they met, what would he say? He might be able to control himself, but how would he control Binodini's crying?

Though Aditya and I are friends, we are very different from each other. I am tired of living this life. I am tired of competition, coaching centres, xerox and typing, advertisements for entrance and scholarship tests, results, percentages of marks, etc. I had scored high percentage of marks in the matriculation examination and yet couldn't get a seat in a good college. I

ended up studying in a place, where lecturers didn't teach properly. After graduation, I got into a computer course, rented a small room in Bhubaneswar, went to cybercafe to seek Julie, got to learn about Binodini, and appeared in I.T. entrance tests.

But I am tired. I can't pull myself forward. In such a long race, I see only possibilities of failure. I have not enjoyed life so far. From my childhood, I have never been to a playground. I have only dreamed for twentyfive years. My father, mother, brothers and sisters also dreamed for me. They would say, "Run, run. Beyond the dream-world lies a beautiful one. Its name is America. There, dollars grow on trees. The roads are paved with gold. People discard new cars after two to three months just like one discards a toothbrush. Once you reach there, all our worries are over."

But I feel tired. I can't go on any more. Aditya can. He is capable of positive thinking and is very practical. He says, running is not important, but winning is. The most important thing is the skill to win. There is no short-cut to winning; one needs to persevere. Yes, one more thing is needed : money or capital. You can't buy a dream without capital. Aditya and I are from middle-class families. Earlier, a lakh was a lot of money. Now this would seem a paltry sum.

I am exhausted. It seems to be an endless race. Long back, I had read a story. The hero of the story said, "So much climbing to reach such a negligible height." I still remember it. I didn't find it relevant then; but now I feel he was absolutely right. What is the great idea in running around so much? It is alright, if one gets an ordinary job. Eat one's

meal at ten and go to office. Come back in the evening and watch TV. Let the days pass like this.

You will eventually grow old.

Translated by Subash C. Khuntia

Mistress of the Forbidden Hamlet

Bibhuti Pattnaik

The tar on the road had started melting in the searing midday heat.

Savitri stepped down from the raised platform, surrounded by a large throng, to a place beside Indira Gandhi Park.

Savitri is a poorly paid school teacher. She has a temporary job, and taught small kids for a monthly wage of one thousand rupees. Tens of thousands of such educational workers staged a sit-in demonstration in front of Chief Minister's residence demanding a hike in their salary and to be given job security. They had launched a relay strike. Their demonstration would continue till the conclusion of the State Assembly session.

Her face sweated profusely in the blistering sun. She was

wiping her face with the small kerchief, when all on a sudden, she saw Jajnaseni. Nearly a month ago, a few educational workers had visited the forbidden hamlet in order to counsel women in the red-light area about health problems. Savitri had struck an acquaintance with Jajnaseni during the course of one such visit. Jajnaseni is the leader of the forbidden hamlet. A sprightly, vivacious girl, this Jajnaseni. She was good at singing devotional songs addressed to Lord Jagannath.

It is difficult to believe that someone so graceful and refined, could live in such a place. It is owing to her only that the forbidden hamlet is out of bounds for vulgar tramps, and wastrels and is frequented by the rich and the sophisticated. It is rumored that she was married into the Royal family of Nischintpur. The prince was a handsome young man but he was impotent. Taking advantage of his son's disability, her father-in-law attempted to rape her. Jajnaseni ran away from the royal household severing all her ties with it. She funded this hamlet, located at the outskirts of the capital.

When she ran into her, Savitri asked – "Where are you going at this hour of the day ?" Savitri's question was edged with irony and derision. What she meant was – Jajnaseni and her ilk, who inhabited a forbidden hamlet, were like rajanigandha flowers which bloom in the dark. What were they up to at midday in front of the Secretariat ?

Jajnaseni shrugged off this loaded question and broke into a reluctant smile. When Jajnaseni smiled it could unfreeze the most stubborn core of even saints. But that ghost of a smile pierced Savitri's heart.

Jajnaseni said– "I had been to see the Chief Minister."

could he have with this thirty year old woman? Oh no ! this woman is trying to lead her down the garden path, Savitri thought.

She tried to tease Jajnaseni, "The old man has lost all his teeth. Whatever he showed must be artificial ones".

"I did not go to take a look at his teeth. The government has served eviction notices on all the settlers in our area. Where do we go if we are evicted. What shall we eat ? We have teeth but no food to chew and digest. I did not therefore, go to see his teeth, but to show him ours; we too face a life and death problem like you. You face joblessness while we face eviction".

Savitri added, "The C.M. is a very kind-hearted person. He is not willing to give in to our demands under pressure from the Finance Minister. He waves the white paper to us. We are all sitting here to record our protest. What did he say after he heard you out ?"

"The same thing. He showed you the government white paper on Orissa's financial crisis and the cabinet resolution. The hamlet in the heart of the town is, it seems, a blot on the capital's landscape. His government is determined to wipe it out."

On hearing Jajnaseni, a smile flitted across Savitri's face. She made a show of sympathy and told her, "The old man is very obstinate; he is guided by his preconceived notions. Difficult to change his mindset."

"Will you then have to leave the hamlet ?" Savitri murmured.

"In order to clear the slums, the government must make arrangements for rehabilitating. Mr. Haldar has already given us assurance, Haldar, that blue–eyed private secretary to the C.M."

"Mr. Haldar. What has he got to do with these women ?" Savitri wondered. "Did you know him earlier ?", she asked.

"No. He is very close to Suchitra, who lives in our hamlet. Suchitra sings Rabindra Sangeet and Haldar sa'ab is an avid lover of Rabindra Sangeet. On the first day of Baisakh, almost every year, Suchitra visits Haldar Sa'ab's bungalow."

All on a sudden, Savitri recalled how a newspaper report had mentioned a government car frequenting the Capital's red light area. Did it belong to Mr. Haldar? She said, "Once a cabinet decision to evict you is taken, Mr. Haldar may not be able to help you. Besides, it is rumored that some affluent Oriya NRIs are keen to set up a hospital where your hamlet is located. Under the circumstances, Mr. Haldar, inspite of himself, may not be able to stall the eviction."

Savitri paused a while and continued, "Well, Jajnaseni. If your women could join us and stage a joint demonstration here, we would keep shouting slogans against the government – You would chant devotional hymns to Lord Jagannath – tens of thousands would gather – the government would be compelled to yield to the collective demands of both education and sex workers." But, dismissing her suggestion Jajnaseni said, "I have already grown tired of singing hymns to Lord Jagannath – Lord Jagannath's stubborn core has never melted – Prayers and hymns do not soften callousness. Nor does it change the government's attitude. To do that, you require

force. The day this sex power explodes, all these khadi-clad Ministers and the secretaries in suits will be shattered into fragments." Jajnaseni was spouting fire while uttering these words. By this time, a few reporters and TV cameramen had started gathering around them. One of them asked, "Madam! Do we have your leave to print these words verbatim in our papers ?"

Savitri entreated them, saying, "No, please don't, this is strictly between us, a purely personal exchange."

Undeterred by this, the journalists surrounded Jajnaseni. "Madam, please do not say 'no' to us. Those who exploit women, should not be spared."

A local TV Channel cameraman attempted to take a picture. At this, Jajnaseni let loose a torrent of choicest expletives while covering her face with her hands. The words singed the crowd surrounding her. From no where, a red Maruti car appeared on the scene. Before Savitri could say a formal good-bye, Jajnaseni jumped into it and vanished.

The Assembly session was over. A storm blew on the last day. The tarpaulin roofings at the dharna site got blown off. The bamboo poles of the tent were blown down. Neither the CM nor the Education Minister came to see the agitating education workers, who had staged the demonstration, let alone meet their demands.

But the unanimous cabinet decision was not acted upon. The forbidden hamlet was not to be touched. The Oriya NRIs reportedly grew averse to setting up a hospital on the unholy soil of the city's red-light area. The government formed a sub-committee to explore the possibility of an alternative site for such a noble project. Mr. Haldar headed that committee.

That meant Jajnaseni came out victorious. And what of Savitri ? The failure of Savitri's demands meant that, just after one more month, her family would face utter ruin. The spectre of hunger haunted them.

While she went through life like a dying animal, a vehicle appeared before her rented house one day.

Savitri had a quick change of clothes and stepped out of her house and saw the same journalist who had fled in his motorbike the other day to escape the torrent of Jajnaseni's abuse.

"Madam, a very urgent piece of business brings me here", he said.

"What business do you have with me? If you want some information that relate to the problem of education workers, meet the president of our association." "No, no, I have work with you only. We are keen to publish an intimate account of your meeting with Jajnaseni, the mistress of the forbidden hamlet. The sale proceeds of our paper have plummeted. We are also tired of publishing day in and day out what the stars foretell and quotes from heroes and heroines of Bollywood. Our readers no longer relish these. We think the mystery of Jajnaseni's life will arouse their curiosity."

Savitri disappointed the journalist, "I don't know how to take an interview. You should inverview her yourself."

"Jajnaseni would not stand as a pressman. You yourself saw how she treated journalists."

He pleaded, "Only you can do it. For the job, our paper is ready to give you ten thousand rupees as a token remuneration.

I have already listed the questions you will put to Jajnaseni. She has shown many leading journalists the door in the past without granting an interview and showered choicest abuses on them. She, is a very spirited woman, her life is the stuff, explosive bestsellers are made of. Her story is worth lakhs. The moment her interview comes out in our *Dainik Prabhat*, there will be quite a stir. Should I tell you the truth ? My job at the newspaper will be made permanent. Here is five thousand by way of advance. "

At the sight of the currency notes bearing the picture of Gandhi, Savitri's resistance gave way.

One month from today, she would be jobless.

Five thousand rupees is a sum not be despised.

She was not to take a camera with her. Nor was she to carry paper and a pen. Jajnaseni's companion Amrita Singh had cautioned her earlier not to carry anything of the sort, otherwise Madam won't let Savitri see her.

She knew Amrita earlier. To get her to arrange the inverview with Jajnaseni, Savitri had to buy Amrita a bottle of French perfume. The midday sun had mellowed and sent down soft cool rays when Savitri entered Jajnaseni's chamber in the hamlet quietly.

The room was uncluttered by any bric-a-brac. It was like a bedroom in any middle-class family. There was in it a double bed, a dressing table on which lay some toiletries. A large poster of the Hindi film actress Meena Kumari hung on the wall. Perhaps a still from the film, *Pakeeja*. The room had no table nor a sofa.

Jajnaseni motioned her to sit on one side of the bed and told her, "This is not my pleasure den. The bed has never been sullied by the sweat of a male body."

"Do you, then, sleep alone on this bed ?"

"Yes, I set apart half of it for my absent consort."

"Absent consort ?"

"A disembodied imaginary male with whom I imake love and achieve a total sense of fulfilment. Let me tell you, those that haunt my pleasure den for satiating their lust, cannot satisfy me physically. I can't separate my mind from my body. To those, who offer me money for playing that primordial game with my body for seven seconds or seven minutes, I lend my company but, while doing this, my mind keeps dallying with my absent consort. Ignorant of the game's rules my customers dance and leap and get exhausted in the end and go back to their own houses like thieves. Sometimes I punish them for their failure to impart me a sense of fulfilment. With a broomstick or a whip ! One Central minister, seven State ministers, several officers and captains of industry have been punished in this way for their failure to satisfy me. Lately, I don't let my customers in. I also don't step into my pleasure den – nor do I apply on my body amorous stimulating cosmetics that would excite the male nervous system. Many of our ministers and officers are so much intoxicated with power that they have lost their sexual powers. In public, they are given to vaunting the maleness of power – they know how to slay their opponents by the use of deadly weapons in the arena – but on a bride's bed or that of a mistress, they lie like corpses after a skirmish that lasts a mere seven seconds.

Hence I no longer feel an urge, just for the sake of money, to deck myself up. All too often, these days, I get engrossed in making love with my beloved absent companion."

Savitri asked, "Why did you give up the Nischintpur palace and your princely husband, only to come to this forbidden hamlet? You could consort with your disembodied companion even in the heart of that palace."

Jajnaseni burst out laughing. She continued, "Savitri Didi, a married woman is like a boat moored in the river ghat. No one has the right to row it to the midstream except a lawfully wedded husband. If, instead of my husband, my father-in-law unties that anchored boat and lets it float into the midstream even for the sake of continuing the family line, will not the boat overturn and sink ?"

Amrita brought them two glasses of orange juice.

Moistening her throat with the juice, Jajnaseni went on, "In our society, if a woman is sterile, it will be a sin even to set one's eyes on her. But if a husband fails to give sexual satisfaction to his wife because he is impotent, the wife is looked upon as a bad woman. Afraid of societal mores, swallowing her own tears, the wife remains pure and chaste in her husband's world – ha, ha !" She laughed derisively.

She never sought to stay like a boat being moored at the riverside. She longed to float into an ocean's immensity, leaving the river behind. Many a prince, many a merchant's son ventured out to gather its merchandise of love. Many a pirate have plundered its wealth of affections. But the boat that frolicked with the blue heavens could never be tied down to the shadow

of a tree. The sky-lover, that disembodied consort has beckoned her, again and again, winked at her and invited her to the depths of mid-sea, where the maddening waves are not lost on the dreary, pebbled sands of the seashore.

The pale shadows of the afternoon had thickened by the time Savitri stepped out of the forbidden hamlet. Time appeared to be cold and level like the quiet depths of the mid-sea unruffled by waves. A limousine swam into the sea of darkness that enveloped the heart of the forbidden hamlet.

Savitri nearly bit her tongue off at the sight of its khadi clad passenger.

Oh my goodness, this old man is none other than the Chief Minister !

Translated by K. C. Bal

Hunger

Paramita Satpathi

The job is quite simple. Dig a pit - a yard long, a yard wide and a yard deep. Lift the mud into a leaking bamboo basket, dump the load across the fence. That's all. There are rows and rows of pits to be dug every day. A mass of rickety men and women are engaged in the toil with the scorching sun beating down on them, to earn a princely wage of two rupees per load.

Malati rubbed her eyes with her left hand to get a clear view. She could not. Her vision was failing. This had been happening over the past few months. These days she felt a dull haze hanging before her eyes. But, she had no problem in hearing. She heard a small crowd slowly gathering. She could see a moving mass of dark bodies coming together. Shyam, Ghana, Naha and a few others - the boys of her

village. She could hear them talk excitedly. "Tomorrow, the large project will start. Excavation of the Gaira tank. The tank will be cleared of all mud and silt. It will then have fresh, clear water. At last, the suffering of the village will come to an end once. There will be enough water to drink through the summer. Everyone will earn something as long as the excavation work goes on."

"Digging is not a big job", she could hear them say. "You dig a pit, lift the mud into a bamboo basket, throw it across the fence, that's all, and get two rupees for your work". Malati sensed the excitement in the air. The boys and men were talking excitedly in anticipation of a steady flow of jobs. Digging of our village tank today, the village tank of the neighbouring village the next day. The work will go on. Wages will be earned every day. There will be enough food for all - piping hot rice with hot curries and enough water to drink.

Malati knew the Gaira tank from her childhood. A host of childhood memories were associated with the tank - having a splash there, catching fish and so on. She joined the long queue of men and women, dragging her injured left foot and leaning on her walking stick. She could see the sound of digging in the distance. She could hear loads of baskets changing heads. "Is that Kusum's husband?"Perhaps it was Kusum standing next to him with her sari tied above her knees. Kusum was helping her husband by filling the baskets with the mud. He was helping her by raising it to her head. Kusum was slowly moving towards the fence to unload the basket.

Dreams came floating to her, like the aroma of hot food. Two rupees added to two more make a fortune. The aroma of hot rice and that of hot curry blend to fill the air with an irresistible smell. Cool drinking water to wash a heavy meal down. What more could one ask for?

Why did Narain, her young son, leave the village at a time like this ? He could have waited for a fortnight more. How many multiples of two rupees he could have earned ! Her daughter-in-law could have cooked hot rice and hot curry for all of them. She could have made steaming potato curries. Her grandson would have made repeated trips to the kitchen to see if the meal was ready. "Just a moment, my son, it is nearly done," she would have said. Dreams kept floating before her eyes. She let out a sigh.

Her daughter-in-law, pregnant again, had left, taking her two boys with her. She did not want to stay a day longer. The family was going hungry. The boys were starving. She could not take it any more. She pressed her husband to leave the village in search of a job in the town. Malati begged her not to leave. She begged her son, "Just wait for a few days more, there will be rains, there will be plenty of jobs, enough food for all of us". But all this fell on deaf ears.

Narain was her fifth child, born after four children had died, after their birth. He was the apple of her eyes. Even he ditched her. He became a hen-pecked husband and always took his wife's side. Malati felt very lonely and miserable. She could not blame her daughter-in-law as her two grandsons were starving and getting restless. She could not get anything for them to eat?? No job was available. One had to walk five

miles to get a job that brought only a paltry sum. Narain could not have managed even that. He was getting thinner and his health was giving way. She could see him slowly wilting.

One day, Malati woke up quite late in the morning. A group of noisy crows had gathered in the courtyard. Maybe squabbling over a dead rat. She would have to clean the mess. She saw a new five rupee note lying on the mat in the veranda held down by a small piece of stone. Her eyes sparkled. She had not set her eyes on such a high denomination note for quite some time. Narain had once shown her one. She now picked it up excitedly in her trembling hands, looked at it hard against the light. "It is real", she concluded. She saw that the front door stood ajar and there was silence inside. At first, she thought her daughter-in law and her two sons were all asleep and that her son had already gone out in search of a job. Or may be he had just gone out and would be back soon. Then the familiar drama of their daily life would unfold: pungent remarks from her ever-grumbling daughter-in-law, endless demands from her two hungry grand sons, the sad and defeated face of her son- already looking old beyond his ears. Her heart began to sink when she thought of him.

She now gave up all hope. Narain would not come back. She went inside the kitchen. There was only a handful of rice in the basket. She felt no urge to boil it to cook a meal for herself. She was too tired and broken. She sat down with her back against the wall. The news had spread that Narain had left the village. There were many others like him who had left before : Naba Nahak's son, Dhoba's son. Now it was? Narain, Malati's son.

She remembered the happy times when her husband was alive. Both were young. They were never in want, though they never had plenty. He worked in the field, and earned a small wage. That was enough to support the two of them. She became pregnant, again and again. They had four children-two sons and two daughters. But none of them survived for more than a year. Wasteful expenses added to their misery. Malati's husband could not bear the shock. His health started failing. Narain was born around this time. Malati had a hunch that this one would survive. She prayed to God. He alone could save him. She lavished on Narain? a lot of love and care. He was a plump kid, very attractive. She used to put black dots on his forehead and make him wear a "talisman" to ward off evil eyes. He was very demanding. He would always want to stay in his mother's lap. He would often pull her sari to be breast-fed in public. Malati always obliged him, moving to a corner. Never gave him a chance to sulk.

When Narain was five years old, the village did not receive any rain. The soil turned hard. The ponds dried up. Jobs became scarce. Narain's father insisted on going to a town in search of a job. He left one day, leaving them to fend for themselves. But he came back soon, looking like a ghost, eyes sunken and hair dishevelled. Narain refused to go near him. He felt scared. Malati's husband survived for only a week. He vomited blood. He suffered a lot. Malati consulted a village homeopath. Nothing worked, and he died on the eighth day, leaving behind Malati and her five year old son, Narain. There was nothing to fall back on. But Malati survived and reared her child. Even he, the apple of her eye, now deserted her. He was never going to come back to her.

The sore on her left foot was burning in the heat of the afternoon. It had started as a small wound and then spread to other parts of her body. She put some local herbs on the wound but that did not help. Now her whole leg was infected. No medicine or ointment could control the spread of the blisters. She was scared it might infect her whole body. Her body burned.

Lately, a nurse from the nearby primary health center came to the village accompanied by a few well-dressed assistants carrying medical instruments. They came to deliver some tips to village women on nutrition and health care. Do this and do that. She thought this was all useless. Not for her.

Malati tried to stand up. She was feeling terribly thirsty. She longed for a few drops of water. The Gaira tank had no water, only dry mud. Men were busy digging to make it deeper, so it would not dry up next summer. There would be enough water even in the summer months. She started walking towards the village. It was getting hotter. She stopped in front of Nahak's house.

"Daughter, will you give me some rice water to drink ? I am dying of thirst" she begged. She peeped into the house. Nahak's daughter–in–law was having her meal, a large bowl of watered rice. Her three children sat around her and shared it. In a small plate there lay some pieces of onions and raw tamarind. Malati felt a cramp in her stomach. She begged again. Nahak's daughter–in–law gave her a nasty look and shouted: "Go somewhere else, there is not a grain of rice at home. How can I give you rice water ?" She noticed that Malati was staring at her rice bowl. She turned her back towards her and hid the bowl from her sight.

"Give me some water at least, I am dying of thirst."

"Where shall I get water from ? All the tanks are dry. There is no water in the well, either. I have walked two miles to fetch a bucket of water. I don't have enough water even for my own children. Please go away"

"Shut the front door, Kuna." she ordered her son in a harsh tone.

Malati climbed down the steps. She could only sigh. Her tears had dried up. She felt as if someone was rubbing burning coal against her thighs. She looked at her wounds. They had become septic. The burning sensation was now unbearable. She wanted to apply something cold to it. Even some cow-dung will do, she thought. She dragged herself towards her house, supporting herself with her stick. She saw some pats of cow dung lying near her house. She picked up a handful, sat down on the verandah and smeared it all over the wound. She sat leaning against the wall and tried to close her eyes.

In a state of reverie, she felt as if someone was entering her house. Was it her daughter-in–law ? She also heard the tinkle of bangles from inside the house. Malati tried to listen carefully. Her sense of hearing was still sharp. She concluded that the noise came from the kitchen. Perhaps her daughter-in-law was draining out the hot water from the bowl of boiled rice. Maybe she was now adding cold water to the rice. She was perhaps taking out baked potatoes from the fire place. She would now be mashing them and adding salt and garlic. Malati could clearly smell the aroma of beaten garlic. Ah, the meal was nearly ready ! The daughter-in-law would soon ask her mother-in-law and her two hungry kids

to come and have their meals. She would sit with the two kids. Then she would drink cool water to her heart's content.

A faint smile appeared on Malati's parched lips. She could still hear properly. She could hear even the sound of her cracking lips. Now she was getting restless. When would the torment come to an end ? When would her daughter–in-law ask her to come and have her meal ? She could hear a buzz invading her ears. She tried to wave it away. But her hands did not move. She tried to focus her attention so that she would be able to hear when her daughter-in-law called. She would call any moment.......

Translated by Prasanta Das

The Journey

Gouranga Charan Dash

She had once written to me, "Deb, your home is the safest place for your body and mind. That is why we call home the heaven on earth. Promise to me, you will come to my stained cottage and make it whole. Please don't come alone. Bring your lovely doll along. Will you ?"

She could not believe that I was indebted to her. For her I was a saint—but a saint leading a cowardly life. Husband of devoted Sati. Adjectives like learned, principled, researcher, straight-talking, erudite were applied to me. If you are yourself complete, how can you ever notice the incompleteness of someone else !

But she did not know that if you asked this man called Debdas, to introduce himself he would declare the views of

others on him to be false, and say, "My inability to be ordinary has made me immobile, has taken me away from life. I am seeking freedom, liberty. I am striving to be a human being." He will say this and break into tears.

Perhaps she could see how Debdas was struggling to become a human being. She had promised to release him from his ego. And she wrote, 'Please come, I am waiting for you.'

And I set out from my house in deference to her wishes. But I set out alone. Did not take her dear doll with me.

I started very early in the morning. Sati came to see me off. She walked quite a distance, looking dishevelled as always. She would not reconcile herself to the idea that you should leave your original self at home when you leave it. She would not go back until I forced her to. She returned only when my shadow was out of her sight.

I told her, – "Please go back, it's already daybreak."

She said, with some reservation, "Yes I'll. But you will come back soon. I have something to tell you."

Something to tell me? Please go ahead. I came a little closer to her.

She looked around wistfully, and said, 'Not here.'

The glow of affection on her grown-up face made me a little absent-minded. I spoke in a low voice, so low that only she could hear me and she said, 'Sorry'.

But she said as if she did not hear me – "Come back soon. I don't know why, but I am not feeling well.' And she

stood there motionless. Does she know that someone else is waiting for me elsewhere? Someone who used to say, Deb, please come soon. My eyes long to see you. I don't know what you would think when you see me. I feel shy. But my emotions are getting the better of me. I can't believe you are coming. You said you have everything. A complete family. Husband, son, daughter, wealth, property, fame. But you would still be feeling as if you had lost something. But what, you would never know. And that is no less painful! Come soon. I have many things to tell you. Things I have not been able to tell anyone. Promises I have not made to others. Can you take it all ? I don't know, who knows?"

Someone stood near me and said, "Come back soon."

The unknown figure was standing at a distance and saying, "I am waiting for you, come back soon."

Two safe abodes. Two challenges. And Debdas caught in between. Nobody can see him, hear him. Oppressed by the endless pain of waiting, he walks on. All alone.

I quite often watch my shadow when I walk. I try to recognise it. I feel like entering into the shadow itself. But I can't. Then I think, can anyone here see himself ? One only moves on and on, carrying the burden of one's own image and experience.

As if in search of a dream!

Just stops once in a while. Feels tired. Tries to get rid of it. And then walks again—looking for a safe abode.

Safe abode? What could it be? A place where one can

unburden oneself, a place to play with oneself to one's hearts content — home ?

But somehow I did not want to reach her safe abode so soon. I am no one's servant. I cannot dance to someone's tune.

I arrived at the bus stand. Kept my suitcase with a tea-stall owner who was known to me. The stall remains open twentyfour hours a day. Spent time gossiping with my friends till noon. In the afternoon, I boarded a bus and travelled a distance of about two hundred kilometres. To her town, Tulsipur.

And I arrived there late in the evening.

My relationship with Tulsipur is a long one. It's not exactly a town, it is a collection of villages, big and small. But there was no mention of any village in her address. Just *Muktinagar.* I took a rickshaw, went to *Muktinagar* square and set about searching for her house.

It has got dark. Hungry Debdas looking for someone else's house in the darkness having left his own early in the morning. Can the thick darkness easily accept such a stranger ? I was defeated and my dearest self was gradually dissolving into an unnatural mirth. I decided that I had better spent the night in a lodging and resume my search the next morning. But there was no lodging nearby. There was one in the Barabazar alley near the bus stand about two kilometres away.

As I was preparing to go back to the bus stand, I found myself drawn by a shadow moving in front of a house. It seemed as if the shadow was waiting for someone. For me it was not a shadow – it was a ray of light.

As I could make out in the darkness, the house was single storeyed, newly constructed. A fenced forecourt. Little bushes and trees grew there. Pucca varandah. And near me ....

I stood for a while near the bamboo gate. Before I could say anything, the shadow drew nearer, as if drawn by some magnetic emotions.

I asked, – "Are you Purnatama Tripathy?"

"No.. No." "I am sorry. I mean, do you know Purnatama Tripathy? Her house is somewhere near here. I think the name of her husband is Hrushikesh Tripathy. I have been looking for the house for about an hour or so. I'm not able to find it. Now I think I should go back. Is it Muktinagar, by the way? I'm forgetting what its name used to be. I don't know why people change names. Well, forget it. I'll be very grateful if you could please do this little favour to me. I've come from a long distance. From Angul. I am Debdas."

The shadow opened the door without saying a word. I walked in. She shut the door. And walked inside. And in spite of not getting a reply, I followed her, as if we were known to each other for ages, waiting for each other.

"Please sit down. Why are you standing?" She pointed towards the bamboo chair under the portico. Her loving words made my sense of guilt disappear. I sat down on the chair.

And she stood there in front of me leaning against a pillar, silently.

The heat of her silence slowly melted down my false self.

And after a while, she went inside the house once more without uttering a word. I don't know why, but I also got up from my seat inspite of myself.

She came back. This time, however, she had in her hands a glass of water and a cup of tea. Her anklets tinkled.

She placed the tray on the teapoy – "Why are you standing ? Please have some tea. You look very tired."

I could not say no to her and sat down on the chair like an obedient child. Took some water and then picked up the cup of tea.

A cup of tea – the panacea for all my problems. Its delicious warmth brought me back to the real world.

I asked her – "Do you know Mrs. Purnatama Tripathy? You did not say anything about her. She is a poetess. She also writes criticism and short stories. She sings and Paints, too. Her husband is a professor. Has a son and a daughter. Her son is doing research. The daughter is perhaps studying in Ravenshaw College. Both of them are very brilliant. They were perhaps staying at the Professors' Colony or some such place earlier. They have moved over to this place after constructing their house here. I think you know her. Yes, they have given a very romantic name to their house too. She is a poetess after all ! I don't remember what it is. But I think it starts with 'aa'."

I emptied the cup while going on and on about Purnatma.

The tinkling of her anklets again drew me back to myself. She picked up the empty glass and the tea cup and walked back into the house.

It was no ordinary gait. It was a well-composed poem.

Her body was a streak of serpentine lightning wrapped inside a red-bordered white sari. Her long hair cascaded down to her hips.

But who is shè?

Is she Purnatama Tripathy, who has kept me under a spell with only a few words ?

A little while later the anklets tinkled again.

I mustered some courage, looked at her face and asked her, "You are so hospitable to a stranger like me. I'll never forget your kindness. I feel indebted to you. Thanks a lot. I have to look for the house of Purnatama. It's already late. I must leave now. Good night."

Before I could finish, she said, "What would you do, if you don't find the house of Mrs. Tripathy ?"

"I'll go back."

"Will you get a bus so late at night ?"

"I'll do something. May get a ride on a lorry from Cuttack. Let's see what God has in store for me."

I rose to take leave of her.

She said, "You can stay here if it is not inconvenient to you." There was an intense genuineness about her request. As if someone was leading mȩ by the hand towards her, singing the song of life.

Puzzled, I asked her, "Here, in your house? Will there be.....?"

She completed the sentence, "There will be no problem. You may have some problem. But we have none. You may find the hustle and bustle a little unnatural !"

I replied, "Hustle bustle? I don't find anybody else except you."

"Nobody except me is here now", she said, "I am not alone. Everyone, my husband, my father-in-law, my mother-in-law, my daughter, my guests are all strangers to you. Do you know what is empathy? Forging links with unknown people. A stranger is one's real guest."

"But ?"

She said, heaving a deep sigh, "Yes, you have not seen even a crow, a cuckoo, a cat or a puppy."

You are totally caught in a web of suspicions. A big house, a dark night, a beautiful woman. And, on top of that, she is waiting all alone. It's but natural that you find things so mysterious.

"You will see, they will not allow us to stay alone. Everybody will arrive here in time. There is nothing to be afraid of. You are exhausted. Please change your clothes. You will feel fresh. You can go to meet Purnatama later. Debdases never go back without achieving ? Please stay back."

She stood up. And so did I. She led me into her house. I came under the spell of her magical personality and her engaging way of talking.

Suitcase in hand, I followed her. She took the suitcase from me and showed me the way to bed room.

I was feeling very tired. I thanked God profusely as I got a place to stay for the night. But the very next moment, I felt, as if Almighty has let me into a labyrinth. And having seen my image inside the labyrinth, I was only moving aimlessly like a vagabond. Smilingly, He tells me, "Deb, it is not a labyrinth. It's a magic world. You were a sheep until now. Your time for deliverance has arrived. Just wait. But the fear and fatigue of becoming a sheep again should not ......"

Hearing my inner voice made me laugh. I profusely thanked the foolish God and said, "To be a sheep, what nonsense. What did he say – fear and fatigue ? My foot." The dust and the odour of sweat were making me uncomfortable. Felt like having a shower. Had a bath early in the morning. Had not even washed my face thereafter. I took off my shirt and my trousers and went into the bathroom. It was a new house. Marbled floor and walls. Costly mirrors. A mad man suffering from rabies could also not resist the temptation to take a bath there.

And as the water started pouring down, I thought I heard someone's stern voice. As if Sati pulled me up, "What kind of a man are you? Bathing in a new place. I had warned you against pouring too much water on your body. You may catch cold. And sneeze. I won't listen to your groans then. Do whatever you want."

Her affection and her claim on me could not stop me. I bathed and bathed. Water on my bare body refreshed me. Saw myself closely. And all of a sudden, Purnatama appeared before me, and whispered into my ears, "Deb, the safest and the most secure place to care for one's bare body is a closed room. Don't you think so ?"

In a moment I wriggled out of my Purnatama fixation. This is not Purnatama's house. It belongs to a kind lady, whom I don't know. Would she tolerate bad manners of a guest ? Very bad, shame on me !

I came out after putting on a dhoti and a panjabi. There was silence all around. The outer gate was also open. I came to the portico. How long did I take to wash off all my fatigue?

I sat down on the chair in the portico. Found a cup of tea and a china plate lying before me. I looked around. She said in a nasal voice from somewhere, "Had a good bath ? You may catch cold. Your tea mignt have got cold. Please relish the best thing on the earth first. Then........."

And she slowly drew near and sat down on the chair. Removed the cover on the plate and put a sweet on my palm.

But as I was taking the sweet inside my mouth, I was reminded of the packet inside the suitcase. I stood up.

She asked, "What happened?"

I said, "Nothing much really. I was just looking for my suitcase?"

"What have you brought in it. It is not meant for this house. Please sit down."

There was magic in her voice. I sat down without replying to her.

I started sipping drinking my tea, and asked, "You have not told me your name. Do I not deserve to know it ?"

She kept mum.

After a while, she said, with a little smile, "Certainly not Purnatama. Apoornaa – the incomplete. You don't believe me. Do you ? I am not known by my original name. Father, mother, husband and everybody else call me Uma."

"But I don't see anybody here ?"

"Who ? Who are you looking for ? Husband, children, father-in-law, mother-in-law, others ? See Deb! It's a funny house. Here nobody waits for anyone. Everyone lives in his own world. In fact, can you really call anyone your own, except your own self ? Every living being here believes in such an absurd philosophy." As she said all this, I could hear someone cry within her.

I said, "That is not what we mean by home. Affection, love, sympathy, empathy ...."

"Right, self-denial and more of such things. Of course, they are there. But all these are meant for whom ? Is it not for your own self ?" She said all these without allowing me to finish.

I thought, so much self-centeredness makes a man sick. This amounts to madness.

"Yes. you may call me mad. I would agree with you. But please ask yourself these questions when you are alone. Who is this person who has made you travel like a crazy man? Please put your hand on your heart and say do you really mean when you call your wife incomparably beautiful and virtuous, claim her to be a sati, the most faithful, and that you live for her only? Can you?"

The word Sati from her mouth took my breath away. Nobody other than Purnatama knows this name. Is this lady who introduced herself as Uma and gave me shelter, Purnatama ? What will she think of me?

Perhaps she could sense the commotion within me. Smiling, she said, "See, I don't know your wife's name. She can be called by any name – like my husband calls me. Sometimes Savitri, the pure and sometimes Asati, the impure. The other words he uses you will not find in your dictionary. But, for you, she is certainly sati– the pure. Every woman is a sati to herself and every man a *Satyavan*. If I say this mysterious woman named Uma sitting close to you is impure, a whore, can you still satisfy her needs and love her ? Can you say that her love is not at all self-centred ?"

Can any woman in the world blithely call herself an infidel before a stranger ? I could not believe my ears. I said, "Yes, I believe that my wife is pure. I love her very much. That is why I inflict so much mental torture on her."

"What an achievement ! Had it not been so, you would not have ventured out to make the Apoornaas (the incomplete ones) Purnatamas (complete). You would have only been lying at her feet all the time, glorifying her, singing paeans to her. Don't you agree ?"

I had never had the good fortune of listening to such irreverent comments before. But, then who is this woman who has declared herself impure ? To make her open up a little more, I asked, "Can you tell me whether your husband loves you or not?"

"I say without any hesitation that he loves me. Loves me very much. He also tells me that I am the goddess of his heart and that he can't live without me. But can he tell me what is the degree of truth in such sycophantic statements ? Will you believe me, if I say that I am not a domesticated animal for him, but a free person? Not a human being? And he? He has given me complete freedom. That is why he is a puzzle to all females."

"But then the relationship between the two of you….."

"Relationship? Two animals who are tethered to a single house, a single post or a single cot for ten years of their life can only be friends to each other. What else can you call them ?"

"How do you define love?"

She continued, "We were in love earlier. Like other lovers. We used to move around. Enjoyed each others' bodies. And he used to tell me with a lot of passion– Uma, I can't live without you. One day he compelled me to marry him. I was not prepared to marry so early and begged for some time. Because every woman wants to marry a well-settled, economically secure man. This did not mean that I did not love him. But he said he could not live even for a moment without me and blackmailed me saying me that he had taken such and such uncomfortable decisions. And I surrendered to his wishes."

"Love should eventually lead to marriage. Should it not ?"

As she was narrating all this, her mysterious self had got lost somewhere in the dark sky.

"So far so good. Where is the problem ?" said I.

She was rather startled by my comment. She turned towards me and said, "You know where the problem lies. You know it better than I do. Have you not asked yourself this question?"

"I have, that is why I am saying this."

There was a firmness in her voice, "No, you have not. Had you done so, the reply would not have come so easily. Please bring your faithful husbandhood inside this unfaithful Uma. Uma is waiting to be liberated. Uma is impure. If your dearest Sati discovers you like this, will she feel comfortable ?

"I could not stay calm that day, when I saw my lover-husband in a compromising position with another woman. I protested. And strongly. Got a quick response too. Some hatred, some rebuke and then neglect. When I fell my love meant nothing to him, I decided to pay respect to my womanhood. Deb! You do not know, love is nothing but a delicate feeling. That's all a woman lives for. And if she is hurt time and again, what can she do? Will she not go mad for that little delicate touch of love? Will she not surrender to anyone from whom she would even get this little bit of love? It may be a false achievement, a momentary one or even self-deception, but can you call those special moments unreal ?"

"But what of your husband ?"

"He has to accept his wife's decision. Not only he, any husband for that matter has to. If he resists or refuses to accept, the problem would be that of the husband's, no one else's." There was a gentle firmness in her words.

She continued, "Deb! there is a different kind of happiness in heart-felt acceptance. My husband's acceptance belongs exactly to that category. At that time, I could not deny his freedom and his desire to liberate himself. Had he conspired to keep me confined, had he spread thorns on my way, his masculine ego would certainly have got hurt. He realised my needs and emotions like he has done for himself. He respected my sentiments. If Sati reconciles herself to your needs and dreams, will you have the guts to turn a blind eye towards her demands?"

"The essence of friendship lies in respecting the needs of another person. For this, you need a strong determination. Initially, it looks impossible, but everything becomes possible by the way."

"Deb! men look for a wife who would repeat like a parrot– 'I love you, I love you, I worship you in my present and my next life, you are my saviour. I cannot live without you'. If the husband goes out, the poor thing would keep on waiting for him. After he finishes his bath, she would hand him over the neatly folded dhoti. She would keep everything clean and in order. She would sit near him and cajole him into eating a little more. She would not eat until he has had his meal. She would plant a kiss on him when he goes out every day. She would ask you to accompany her to the market. And she would be doing everything to make your complete family still more complete."

I said sarcastically, "Only these qualities are looked for in a wife?"

She said with a smile, "There are many more things. Would you like me to list them? She would sleep like a pussy

cat curled close to you. Would fondle you. Imagine all kinds of things. She would gather into her your tired body. Would caress it lovingly. She would shed tears seeing streaks of grey in your hair. Pick them one by one. Would force you to paint your hair black."

But somehow wives always live for their husbands. For some reason, the woman's ego never asserts itself. Women are made of some strange stuff. While the women do so, what the husbands do? They move from place to place to fill their lives with new experiences. And claim to be faithful domesticated animals before their wives.

The poor woman would watch herself in the mirror, stand near the window or at the door and keep waiting – if only he could come in a little while ! This 'he' is nothing but the one who is unknown and at the same time intensely her own. All the doors, windows and other give-ways of the house would close the moment he steps in. The soulless silence would give way to a symphony unheard of ever before. There would be fragrance all around, of the kind never inhaled before.

"Can you call the attraction for and the communion with the unknown a constricted relationship? It is unshackled, devoted, but very painful." As she told me all this, I could feel the increasing intensity of the timeless burning of the original soul.

She went on, her voice tinged with sadness, "Do you know the cause of pain, Deb ? Love. It is very difficult to nurture it. Lucky is the person who has begot love. Love is majestic, it brings fulfilment to the life. Between two bodies

appears a strong feeling. There may be fire, rain or wind. But this cannot unnerve them. Those who try to defame them or inflict pain on them fail miserably. Is the power of scandal mongers any match to this surrender?"

"Please tell me, can those persons who live for themselves, disregard the feelings of others. My husband is like many other husbands in this world. I don't know, what category you belong to. You may ask yourself."

Deb was lost in a serious philosophical discussion. One does not really beg for love. It is a complete experience. Yes, it may be momentary. But that momentary experience is unique, boundless. Can the man who desires to live every moment of his life satisfying his own wants, care for the opinion of someone else? If death is the only truth, why not live this moment on your own terms? Why not enjoy the fulfilment of your own desires? Purity, fidelity, sacrifice etc are but illusions. All these constitute a manifesto of the pleasure principle of hedonists. Philosophy of the escapist.

Uma opened up before a stranger, whom she met for the first time. I felt little uncomfortable. Are these sarcastic remarks directed at me? It may be a clever design to prove her fidelity. Otherwise, why did she wait for someone so late in the evening, dressed up like a seductress?

I don't know whether she could sense my suspicion, but breaking the silence in the thin darkness she said, "Deb, I know you must be finding my words very strange. There is something odd about the hospitality of an unknown woman. I am sure you have never come across in your life an unknown

talkative woman like me who goes on talking. You go on listening to her with endless patience saying yes to everything"

"See, you have already heard too many unseemly things from me. I won't bore you any more. I will ensure that you eat, drink and go to bed in peace. I'll also give you the address of Purnatama. I envy Purnatama a lot. As soon as I come to know of her guests, I bring them here. I clear and spruce them up and then send them on to their destination."

I sat motionless, "No, no. It's not like that. You are not at all unknown to me. You are a wonderful poem full of emotions, feeling and surrender."

She burst into laughter and said, "Me, a poem ? How wonderful ! Nothing of the sort. Can a seductress who is never able to hold anyone in her embrace, be a poem? But you may call me a stream. A stream which sprang from the mountain but could never become a river. Somewhere along the way, she got lost. She left the mountains. The mountains are now beyond her reach. Frankly speaking, I have got enmeshed somewhere within my own self. The sea is now an unattainable goal. I don't know how the stream in me dried up. My solitary existence always tells me, "Uma, the only truth for you is living every moment quivering in pain." To fill the void within me I have mortgaged my body and my affection many times to others. But, I have never got anything in return. Things just do not change. It seems as if fate mocks at me. With what ornaments can you deck a life whose present is so bleak like this? You are an educated person. How will you define these experiences? Have you ever asked your dearest Sati about this?"

The mention of Sati once in a while by her appeared to be a challenge to my being. I was taken aback. What would she be doing now? Must be waiting for me. Can she ever imagine that her lover-husband, who always tells her "you are mine only" is at this moment with a mysterious woman ......

Uma said, "Deb! This woman could not become a sati, the pure. So why should any one own her or say she belongs to him ? I carried both the husband and the lover to all kinds of places. I played with their manhood and laid them on either side of my body on the same bed. Like a naked destitute woman on the street. She is a mad woman. She is prepared to die every moment. And enjoys every moment of her life. Nurtures carefully her own helplessness. Calls the rains down – come, drench me. Calls the fire –come, let's burn. Calls the flower – come, give me a kiss. Calls the wind – come, blow these dresses away, wrap them on your body, spread fragrance all over the place. Tells the moon – Shame on you ! How much romance will you watch ? Come over, will you? Who is afraid of sacrilege?"

"Please be honest, can you step forward to take a mad woman like me into your arms, place her on your lap, put her to sleep singing a lullaby? Can you? And if you do so, will Sati who claims to love you so dearly, accept it? Your audacious manhood? When one surrenders to the other, one never gets deceived. Does an infidel has anyone, she could call her own? Does she give anything to anyone? Does she have the right to give? She belongs to so many men, not only to her husband."

Every word spoken by her bubbled with life and feeling. Her shape was not deformed by her falsehood. She was in

quest of life and, in the process, the obduracy of the world has hurt her, has made her unstable. Trying to break free and finding a sympathetic listener like me, she seemed to be soaring into the dark, distant sky.

Deb knelt down before the woman with the unkempt hair, dishevelled dress, the very embodiment of love, the charmer of the world and prayed, "Goddess ! Which demon says you are a courtesan ?"

She listened to me and smiled, "You are a fool indeed, Deb. Have you not yet found out the demons? Those who take it upon themselves to define the faithfulness of a woman. Those who believe in the need for the unconditional surrender of a woman before the promiscuous male. It is not justice; it is the very negation of it."

"Deb! haven't I told you that all desires, all dreams, all achievements and the pride of human beings will be reduced to dust one day or the other. She goes on waiting for someone. Who would own her up. Ruffle her thick hair at bedtime, and say, "I love you very much." And she would fall asleep listening to the songs of love. But nobody ever comes like that. Many do, consciously or unconsciously, as guests. And say, 'You are good, very good.' Liars !"

"Deb! you are a new discovery at the noon of life to this infidel woman. I've nothing to give you. You have done well to come here. You have a pure doll, Sati. Please tell her with an open heart, "I love you very much." See, this unfaithful woman would provide you with opportunities similar to those at Purnatama's residence. She would not betray your desires.

She is so generous, so kind that she would not allow her own husband, son, daughter, father-in-law, mother-in-law or anybody to come in. But before doing all these, she would impose a condition on you. Will you accept it? Do you know what is that fearsome condition ?"

"After some years, she will pass through a terrible time. She will suffer from a dreadful disease without a cure. She will have an infected body the foul smell of which would be unbearable. Many guests will come to her, their hearts full of pity. You will also join them. You will come, sit near me. You will place my motionless head on your lap. With one hand you will hold mine. And caress my head with the other. You will wash my face with a little smile on your lips and a few drops of tear from your eyes. Plant a kiss on my forehead. Which nobody has given me till now. Only this much in the presence of others. Can you do this ?"

Smiling, she asked, "I know Deb, you can't. You are a coward. You don't have the courage to enjoy the taste of freedom. You may be the husband of a faithful woman. But everybody is scared of being burnt by the fire of faithfulness. Even then, you have travelled such a long distance to have Purnatama."

I was brought to my senses by someone's delicate touch. A cold wave surged through my body. I looked around. There was no one.

I felt as if Purnatama has placed her head on my shoulders and is whispering into my ears, "Deb! Oh Deb! Are you afraid? Afraid of what? Only you and I are here. No man can

become whole, unless he becomes the guest of an infidel; unless he surrenders his manhood to the impure. To impish Purnatamas ! Don't you think so ?'

I stood up. My pure self was getting stirred by the passionate call of her open hair and her body. The night was dark and windy.

And I felt, the jouney was successful.

Translated by Shreekant Chatterjee

Swan Song

Krupa Sagar Sahu

I am a freelance journalist, and for the last one year, my main engagement has been to write a weekly column, "Kolkata Dairy", for a daily newspaper. To collect material for my column, I keep roaming around different corners of the city, the main tourist spots, auditoriums and cinema halls.

It was Christmas time. I had spent many an evening going around hotels and restaurants in Park Street to write a story on Kolkata during Christmas. Decorated with coloured lights and bright hangings, the hotels, restaurants and shopping centers glittered like models at a fashion parade.

I was seated in an open-air restaurant in one of the four–star hotels, at a table booked earlier, anticipating a great rush.

A stage had been set in one corner of the restaurant and its rear wall looked as if it was draped with a green saree

woven out of imported creepers. Pots of gladioli, petunia, pansy and zenia placed around the stage added colour to the scene. The restaurant opened to a sprawling lawn, bordered on all sides with shrubs like bouganvilla and croton. Even the plants appeared to exude a sense of mirth. I thought of the atmosphere of gay abandon of the previous night's celebration on the Christmas eve. Colourful festoons, some shaped like the moon and stars and others shaped like forks, spoons, fishes, prawn crabs hung all around. e hall of the hotel displayed rows and rows of many coloured paper cutouts and hangings. A flowering plant at the center was decorated like a Christmas tree.

I was surprised that there were no guests in the restaurant, except myself. The Christmas season attracts large crowds into restaurants, and I was wondering why this restaurant was empty. The hotel had recently opened a buffet style restaurant and the novelty should have attracted many. Or, maybe, many were celebrating Christmas at home after the late night revelry last night.

While I was immersed in such thoughts, the bearer produced the menu card. Somebody walked on to the stage, a flute in one hand. The thought that the person was looking like Lord Krishna of Kaliyug amused me. A young man followed carrying the tabla. He sat down and started hammering the tabla, tuning it.

As I went through the menu the bearer asked, "Any drinks, Sir ?"

I never drink. So I said, "No, thanks."

The bearer pointed his finger to one item on the menu

and said, "Try this, Sir. A non-alcoholic cocktail, you will like it."

I said okay and added that I would place the order for dinner a little while later.

The flute player now started playing. He was around seventy years old; his cheek bones were prominent through the profusion of white beard. His face seemed familiar. As an admirer of Indian classical music, I attended most of the musical programmes in the city. Aside from the most well-known musical events I attended many privately arranged music soirees, and I felt that I had seen the flutist somewhere.

The bearer placed a large glass and two plates of starters before me.

The flute now came to life. The 'alap' was light, like a gentle breeze blowing through pine leaves, cool and soft. The tabla player seemed totally engrossed in playing the instrument, keeping the beat, shaking his head gently.

I felt a deep sympathy for the flutist, who was playing to an empty hall. The sound of utensils and cutlery rattling inside the kitchen came in. Gusts of breeze brought in the sound of pop music played outside.

After the 'alap', the flute player wiped his face and his glasses. No applause greeted him. Familiar with the ways of artists, I could well imagine the reaction of an artist in a situation like this. Art has no meaning to those who are insensitive. The flutist looked up at me, and started playing a different 'raag', after giving instructions the tabla player with a light nod.

Time passed. The chill of a December night brought a

mild shiver. In the mean time, another table came to be occupied.

The raag conveyed a deep sorrow. Shelley, the great English poet, said that music that was sad was the best music of all. Maybe because sadness claims a very large part of our life. Anyway, life is full of sorrow, and that may be the reason why sad music provides a soothing balm. I wondered what emotions the flutist was expressing : accumulated sorrow, pain or frustration.

A few of the waiters had gathered near the stage. The other guest concentrated single-mindedly on his drinks and the bearers started whispering amongst themselves.

"This Christmas has been a total failure. On a day like this there are no guests in the restaurant !"

Somebody added, "Who will come to listen to such depressing music?"

The first speaker said, "Could not the Manager get some other artist? How can this old flutist attract guests?"

"There should have been Pop music like last night. With the tips we'll get tonight we'll not be able to pay our bus fare."

Someone else shouted from inside," Ustad, why not play a film tune."

Lost in the music, I felt annoyed and upset at the insults heaped on an artist.

A little later, the flute player came down from the stage and went inside. I requested the tabla player to come to my table.

"Please sit down. Did the Ustad get annoyed," I asked.

"Oh no, Saheb," he replied. "Chacha is a diabetic and has to go to the bathroom frequently."

"Oh, I thought that the Ustad got annoyed with the bearers for their uncharitable remarks."

"No, nothing like that. Immersed in the music, Chacha transports himself into another world, where no such comment can reach him."

"What is the name of your Chacha? I seem to have seen him somewhere."

"Ustad Halim Khan," he said," You must have seen him earlier in important music festivals. Now, it seems, the doors to those festivals are closed to Chacha. This is the age of publicity and contacts. Only those who can beat their own drums become successful. Only they go up. Ustad does not get invitations to those festivals now a days. A very bad time. To get by, he has to perform at hotels like this."

The voice of the tabla player expressed deep anguish. He said, "Hardly anybody recognizes a pure diamond. But Chacha has not lost hope. He says that the world is a vast place. Somebody, someday will appreciate the quality of his music. Allah is merciful. He preaches patience."

I said, "These are days of self-promotion. One must move with the time."

"Chacha is highly self-respecting. He will never stoop to promoting himself. He says that Jasmine flowers never go around advertising their fragrance. Earlier, Chachi used to accompany

him on Tanpura. You just heard the sarcastic comments of the hotel bearers. Everybody loves Pop, Rock and Disco these days. Who will appreciate classical music? Chachi could not put up with the insults and stopped playing the tanpura."

"Did Chachi totally distance herself from classical music."

"What else could she do? She now suffers from asthma, and engages herself in stitching garments."

I asked, "Where does Ustad stay? I shall go to his place, one of these days and write an article on his music and that will give him publicity."

"Chacha stays in Metiaburuz ! Oh, Chacha is back. Now he will play a very good Raag, 'Malkosh'. Kindly tell us how you like it. Also, please write about Chacha in your newspaper."

He left me and went up to the stage. I had forgotten to ask his name.

The moon was riding the sky.

The raag was like gushing stream, descending from the mountain ranges, rippling down the stone steps, creating a celestial rhythm.

Ustad Halim Khan immersed himself in his music; no other sound could reach him, not the pop music from the nearby lane nor the sarcastic comments from the waiters. I felt intoxicated although I had not taken a drop of alcohol. I wondered if the coconut trees had bent down to hear the music, or if two birds flew out of the dense foliage calling, "Wah, Ustad."

The presentation of raag 'Malkosh' lasted for about half

an hour. The Ustad sipped a little water after having played it. I looked to my left. I had not noticed that a young western lady had in the mean time occupied the table next to mine and got lost in the music.

She asked me, "Excuse me, what raag did the Ustad play? I have recorded his rerdition."

I explained to her the raag 'Malkosh' and then went to the Ustad to offer him my congratulations. I asked him about the next raag.

I came back to the lady. "Madam, now he will play the raag 'Hansadhawani'. The raag originated in the south. This is the last item this evening. I am sure you will like it."

Ustad Halim Khan used a larger flute for presenting the raag. With his face uplifted, looking at the sky, he continued playing, as if he was dedicating the music to the stars, planets and the moon and then to the creator of the universe. While singing, he was perhaps saying," Oh Allah, Oh God, this is your creation, every atom in the universe belongs to you and this music is also yours; I am only the medium."

He had floated in to another world, while dedicating himself to the Almighty. He had lifted himself above all petty disappointments of the mundane world. As if the deep crevices in his life were getting filled with bliss.

Ustad had moved far away from the stinking open drains of Metiaburuz, its accumulated dirt and muck, the grunts of stray pigs and the racking cough of his ailing wife. From the lofty height to which he had elevated himself, he could hear only the music of the spring, the singing of the cuckoo and the sweet chorus of a flock of swans.

I felt as if the fragrance of the music lying bottled by a magician for ages was finding its release, flying out into all corners of the world.

The lady took pictures of the Ustad, one after another. The music attained greater depth as the night advanced. The tabla player, with swift and forceful movement of his palms and fingers, tried to keep pace with the rhythm.

The rhythm of the raag slowed down gradually and the recital came to an end. The Ustad continued to look up at the sky, at the floating clouds and the moon.

I ran up to the stage and exclaimed, "Wah, Ustad, you are great." The lady shook his hand and said, "I have been listening to the music, sitting in the balcony and came down, as if in a trance. I have recorded a few of the raags. The company, for which I work in America, intends to organize a classical music festival. I shall recommend your name for that event."

I translated these words for the benefit of the Ustad. Ustad Halim Khan became speechless. With eyes lowered in humility, he said, "Thank you," and touched his palms to his forehead.

I said addressing the lady, "The Ustad is a highly talented musician. Many, many thanks for appreciating his talent. Many a talent lies hidden in all corners of our country. Bringing them to limelight will be a great service to the nation."

She collected the Ustad's address. I took her visiting card and gave her mine.

A few months rolled by. One day, I met the tabla player in Kidderpur market. I was feeling a little embarrassed as I had not kept my promise to write an article on Ustad Halim Khan. My weekly column on Christmas bore a casual mention of the artist. Of course, the editor removed most of the lines I had written on the Ustad. I felt awkward, when I came face to face with the tabla player.

"Oh, the journalist. Salam Alekum."

"Alekum Salam," I said and asked," Is everything alright ?"

I invited him for a cup of tea in a nearby shop. Seating ourselves at a table, I asked, "How is the Ustad."

Taking a deep breath he said, "Not well, Sir. The programme at the hotel was his very last. The Ustad became really emotional when he heard the young lady praise him and when she ivited him to visit America. On the way back, he was highly excited, 'Did you see ? I knew that some day, somebody will come and appreciate my art.' Later, I heard from Chachi that the Ustad could not sleep the whole night. He repeatedly narrated the programme at the hotel, praises the lady lavished on him and expressed his gratitude to Allah. But Allah has no compassion. Maybe, He does not grant excessive happiness to anybody."

What he said made me feel anxious. I asked, "What happened?"

"Chachi called me in the morning. Chacha got paralyzed on the left side. The doctor said that it was caused by lack of sleep and a stroke caused by increased blood pressure, a result of excessive emotional stress and anxiety. His lips got deformed."

I paused for a little while and asked, "Any news from the foreign lady?"

"Yes, she did keep her promise. Along with the letter of invitation, she sent return tickets for the three of us and a cheque for ten thousand dollars. She had produced a cassette of the raag played that night called 'Hansadhwani' and she wrote that it was to be launched at the music festival. She had also sent five photographs of the evening along with the letter.

Chachi called me the day the letter came. I read it out to Chacha and watched his paralysed face, beaming with pleasure. He motioned to me to fetch the flute, which he touched to his lips and pressed it to his bosom, keeping his eyes shut."

Chachi offered me a cup of tea. I was wondering if Chacha was dreaming of a visit to America. Suddenly the flute dropped from his hand. The doctor said that he had a second stroke. After three days in a state of coma, Chacha left for his heavenly abode. One who has never experienced any happiness in life, loses the ability to bear excessive pleasure. Chacha was no exception.

Chachi took out the photographs, from the envelope and returned those to me saying, 'Send these back to that witch.'

Can't blame Chachi, she belongs to a different era. Influenced by blind faith, she accused the young lady, for the untimely death of her husband. I protested, 'But Chachi, why should the money be returned? This has been sent by the lady as the appreciation for Chacha's art.'

'No, my boy. No body can put a price on his art.'

The tea had gone cold. I wondered if fate decreed that I should write the obituary of a great artist.

Translated by Renuka Rath

Darkness around Indranil

Ajaya Swain

What's in his head ?

A lump of shit or cowdung !

What's his name ? Indranil !

In spite of a nagging pain in the spine he runs, climbs trees and walks back all the way home after a late night show.

Then who says Indranil's head is only stuffed with cowdung ?

Pali Das, of course !

But Indranil calls Pali a genius.

When he first met Pali Das, thought Pali was a boy.

Pali also fancied herself as a boy since her childhood. After three daughters in a row, her parents hoped they would

have a boy. Her father religiously visited a Shiv temple every Monday to pray for a son. Her mother felt the mild kicks of her imaginary son in her womb.

But in the end, Pali was born. Her father did not bother to come to see his new-born daughter after he received the news in his office. Grandma predicted for Pali a life of hellish suffering, reading her broad and prominent forehead.

People say her mother cried for four years and always cursed Pali, saying, "Why did you take birth at all and bring us such misfortune."

No one knows on whose advice her mother started treating Pali like a boy. (May be she thought that such belief may bless her with a son the next time round). So Pali wore a pair of trousers and shirts instead of frocks. She wore her hair shorts like a boy. She sat next to the boys in the classroom. She made friends with only the boys of her class.

But her voice had all the tenderness of a girl's and her eyes were beautiful. Hence, at times boys of her class occasionally took her for a girl.

As days passed by, she grew. She passed out of her high school, and went to college. Although, at college, she could not mingle much with boys, she always wore trousers and shirts and had few friends among the girls.

In fact Pali could never make up her mind about whom to make friends with. Then, one day, she met Indranil while doing her M.A. Indranil had nice long hair and looked like a young girl. His face wore a sad, thoughtful, faraway look.

Indranil was a poet. He wrote poems but tore them up once he wrote them down. They were never published.

He was also a painter. He painted moonlit nights and magical trees growing on a mountaintop. He painted a lonely boat in a blue lake, and the sagging breasts of an old lady searching for her lost youth. His unfinished paintings littered his small rented room.

He was a singer as well. A cigarette hanging from his lips, he hummed Elton John in Madrid style or Bade Ghulam Ali Khan. But when asked to sing, his face turned crimson.

He was a good student.

Once he saw Pali Das, Indranil at once fell in love with her. How love between bashful Indranil and strange Pali struck roots and spread out its branches eluded an answer.

Pali Das had all along looked upon herself as a boy and, when she met Indranil, he had already been overcome by a loss of interest in the world. He drew no pleasure from workaday life, repetitive dreams, routine letters to home, waiting for something to happen and rounding the day off with a feeling of despair. He wanted to free himself from all these. Just when he was contemplating suicide as a way out, Pali Das walked into his life.

Pali used to wear jeans and T-shirts. She wore her hair long like some boys and put on a golden watch on her wrist. Indranil shook hands with her believing her to be a boy but felt a feminine tenderness in her palms and held her hand for some more time. Pali quickly extricated them.

Indranil, realized that Pali was not a boy; she must be a girl. But he dared not ask her. They met each other, day after day, in the library or in the canteen. Pali was a boy as far as Indranil was concerned.

Once they went to a cinema, and during the show Indranil took Pali's hand into his own. Both her palms were soft with sweat, and Pali let them lie in Indranil's grip. Keeping her head on his shoulder, she took deep breaths, and Indranil stroked Pali's cheeks tenderly.

In the middle of the show Pali got up and said, "Let's go". On their way back Indranil still could not bring himself to ask her anything. Pali said on her own, "If tomorrow I turn into a girl ...... Let's say, like any other girl .... Shall we still remain friends ?" Indranil smiled and said, "We may not remain friends, but we will become lover and beloved." Pali's face turned red and she said, "Rubbish".

Indranil went back to his room. The room was littered with garbage, and a sour smell hung in the air. He lay on bed and tried to visualize Pali as a young woman. He implanted a pair of ample bosoms on the boyish chest of Pali and fancied a few tinkling bangles around her wrist an anklet above her feet, a red bindi on her forehead, red colour on her lips and an intricate traceries of mehendi on her palms. He also imagined a delicately placed mole just below her lips. He pictured her walking with a languorous feminine gait. He longed to give her a pair of wings so as to turn her into a fairy, but on second thoughts decided against it. He removed her jeans and T-shirts to make room for a feminine salwar

and kameej. When, after all this, he proceeded to possess her, sleep overtook him.

All through the night he dreamt countless dreams, but in none of them did Pali Das figure. He saw two horns jutting out on his head, a sky the colour of butterflies, and a mischievous boy throwing stones into a river.

He woke up early in the morning with fond memories of his dreams; like his life, he thought, his dreams too were chaotic. Perhaps Freud could have written about the life and loves of the people who saw such dreams. He has not read much Freud. Indranil spent a large part of his life dreaming such dreams. Alas ! he never remembered them. Good in a way, he thought. At least, he can keep all his dreams for himself; no one else could claim a share in them.

Pali came, always dreamlike and mysterious. Once Indranil invited Pali to his room and said, "Today let us have food together, sleep together and dream together".

Pali felt embarrassed and said, "You know who sleep together ? I hate such jokes."

Indranil kept one hand on Pali's shoulder and said, "It's not a joke". Putting his hand around Pali he again said, "In fact, how can we be friends without eating, drinking and sleeping together ?"

Pali pulled herself away from him and stood at a distance. Indranil stepped closer to Pali and rubbed his cheeks against hers, "Oh, you are really a girl."

Pali took leave of Indranil. She walked ahead of him and felt a change coming over her as her walk turned more feminine. She remembered the warmth of Indranil's body and her gait grew unsteady. She felt an inexplicable pain in the base of her neck and her breasts, which, strangely, brought her a sense of relief. She felt as if hundreds of prying eyes focused on her, and she walked out of darkness like a ray of moonlight.

Indranil looked and still could not figure out whether Pali was a boy or girl. He thought Pali might be a girl in the guise of a boy looking for something she could have only if she remained a boy. However, Indranil dismissed these thoughts.

He imagined that Pali must have reached her house. She must have slept for a while, her face down, and must have refused dinner. When pressed by her father, she must have said she had eaten something in the university department after a seminar. She must have got up at night, walked upto the mirror and generously applied cream on her face, rouge on her cheeks and lipstick on her lips. The slight of her sister's breasts must have made her look at the reflection of her own masculine body. She must have worn her elder sister's saree and blouse etc., stood before the mirror and considered her image with a smile. Then she must have remembered Indranil and a tremor must have passed through her body. Her sister might have turned over her side, and , in panic, Pali might have switched the light off and jumped into the bed snuggling close to her sister. In the morning, everybody might have seen a different Pali, a Pali who was more of a girl and less of a boy.

Pali went to the bathroom and took a bath. She felt an oppressive warmth burn her body and she felt ashamed of herself while taking her bath. She was late for her class. Indranil was sitting on the front bench of the library. His bearded face glowed in the sunlight. He called her and said, "Let's go to my house today. I have lots of things to talk to you about." Somehow, she could not say no to him.

They got into a rickshaw, and, on the way, Pali could not utter a word, her body trembling all the while. Indranil unlocked the door of his room, which had a small window. Inside it was almost dark, He switched on the light, which burned weakly. A sour smell pervaded the room. Pali sat nervously on the bed, which was littered with magazines, pornographic books, the complete works of Shakespeare, pieces of paper, a pen and a dirty pillow. These gave off the sharp odour of dried sweat.

Everything around was as disorganised as Indranil himself. Still Pali Das liked the room, its darkness and the offensive odour which hung in the air. Indranil whispered in Pali's ear, "Would you like to have a cup of tea. I have a heater."

Pali shook her head. She liked the cigarette smell coming from Indranil's mouth.

Indranil said, "Shall I ask you a question."

"You may", Pali said.

Indranil edged closer to Pali and, while gently stroking her shoulder, he asked, "Are you really a boy ?"

Pali turned red with shame and said nothing. Indranil now kissed her, and her body experienced a strange sensation.

She lay down on the bed.

Indranil unbuttoned her shirt and rubbed his face on her boyish chest, whispering all along, "I love you, Pali".

Pali was speechless and felt as if she was going to faint.

Indranil's hand was roaming all over her body, his palm resembling the hood of a cobra. Like a python he encircled her body and crushed her bones. Pali wondered how much pain and pleasure was there in this act of aggression. In fact, she lost her consciousness and experienced a strange metamorphosis overtaking her. At the end of it all, she probably went to sleep. Or died for a brief while.

It was dark and raining when Pali came back home alone in a rickshaw. She was still alive to the odour of Indranil's sweat in her body. The odour of his bed and pillow still clung to her neck. Through the drizzle, Pali reached home soaked through. She felt that she might lose her consciousness any moment. She quickly got rid of all her masculine clothes, put on a blouse and wrapped herself in a saree. She put a small bindi on her forehead. Exhausted, she went into a deep slumber.

Her father said, "Pali must be studying."

Her mother was apprehensive that someone had hurt Pali.

But her elder sister said dismissing these apprehensions, "She is a habitual show-off." The considerate younger sister said, "She appears to be tense these days."

After some time, Pali walked out of her room. Her

mother was pleasantly surprised to see Pali utterly transformed. She had never imagined that Pali could look so beautiful when she was in a saree. Her elder sister, feeling a little jealous, admonished Pali for spoiling her saree. Her father, his eyes brimming with tears, said, "Pali, my daughter, from tomorrow you will wear only sarees. Really, you look like a goddess when you put on a saree". Plai felt shy, ran back into her room and bolted it from inside.

She slept well at night and, in the morning, she showed the first signs of having attained her womanhood. Mother said we could now celebrate the marriages of both the daughters on the same day. One should take extra care when there are vulnerable young girls in the family.

Pali held Indranil responsible for everything and the changes that had come over her body and mind. At last she became Miss Pali Das.

Was Pali really interested in becoming a girl ? There never was a boy in Pali Das. There was a girl hidden deep within her, who had a desire to play on a swing during the 'Raja' festival. She longed to have mehendi on her hands and grow long nails in her finger although these dreams had remained long unrealized.

At last, she really turned into a girl. However, she was reluctant to go to college wearing feminine clothes. She therefore discontinued her studies, stayed at home, watched television and never met her friends. But she thought and dreamt of Indranil.

Slowly she grew fairer and more beautiful. Her short hair became long, and she grew bashful and shy.

For his part, Indranil waited endlessly in the corridors of the university, the library, the classroom and in the verandah of the common room. His beard grew, his dress became dirtier, his hair turned grey and his friends remarked, "Indranil has gone mad", But they could never trace his madness to any girl they know, as they had no inkling that Pali was a girl. Indranil waited for Pali. He could not concentrate on his studies, nor did he appear for his examinations. One day, he thought he should go and meet Pali. Without Pali, he thought his life had become meaningless. He even contemplated suicide. He wanted to commit suicide in a state of complete nudity with the words, "Great Joke of the Millennium," inscribed on his chest.

One day he received a letter, which said:

You discovered me. You are my Vasco de Gama or Columbus. Oh my dear Columbus, I am unable to meet you. Only I can think or dream about you. I can feel your smell and your playfulness. Perhaps I could never have written such a letter six months ago. You had asked me whether I was a boy or a girl. In fact, I am a girl and I am Miss Pali Das. I had no earlier knowledge of my hidden femininity. You made me realise this and I am grateful to you. Now my parents, sisters, relatives and friends are wondering whether I can ever marry a boy. If at all I marry whether I will be able to bear a child. They are still uncertain about my gender. Still I have to prove that I am a girl. In fact in a place like this it is not

a matter of pride to be counted as a girl. However, I will have to accept such metamorphoses and assert my new identity. Don't you feel so ? Are you with me ?

Yours Pali.

Indranil read the letter and smiled to himself. He kept the letter in his wallet; he might need this : Pali might come to him one day in search of the first letter she wrote as a woman.

During his endless wait for Pali, Indranil lost interest in everything and, finally, had to leave his rented house. He planned to go back to his village. Before leaving, he wanted to meet Pali for the last time. He thought of starting a small business or doing farming. He was in a self-destructive mood and wanted Pali to know that she had ruined him.

It was midday by the time he finally located the house of Pali Das. Perhaps he was the only lover in the world who did not know the address of his beloved. He pressed the doorbell, and a man in his late fifties opened the door. He could not recognise him and in order to take a closer view he wiped his glasses and put them on again. Indranil introduced himself, "I am Indranil, Pali's classmate. I have come to meet her." The gentleman did not respond immediately, and after a few moments said, "There is nobody named Pali living here. Only my youngest son, Pulak Das, is with me."

Startled, Indranil asked, "What about Pali, who was my friend". The gentleman was a little annoyed and said, "Pali became Pulak three months ago, and he does not want to meet anybody."

He spotted someone in the distance and said, "Hey ! Again the journalists have descended on us. You may leave now. I will have to close the door." He shut the door on Indranil's face.

Indranil could never understand Pali, nor could ever hope to do so.

Translated by Arun Pratap Das

Illusions

Debabrata Madanray

The announcement was very unusual. Only four persons were there at home : Suchitra, Abinash, and their son and daughter in law. The house looked small, in spite of its area. They looked at each other in a detached way. There was a gleam in the eyes of Suchitra. She repeated the announcement to guard herself against the suspicion of others.

"You plan to go to *Kumbhamela* even as you are so unwell ?" asked her daughter-in-law.

It is true that Suchitra had a severe heart attack a week ago and had barely escaped from the jaws of death. The doctor had advised her complete rest. Any sort of tension would be injurious to her health.

Suchitra did not feel like responding to her daughter-in-law's remarks. Rather, she tried to convince Abinash that her decision, was final. Nothing, neither her ill health nor Abinash could prevent her from going.

To avoid conflict, Abinash replied to her announcement, "Yes, you will certainly go and I will accompany."

Suchitra's face lit up. The cramped house appeared a little less suffocating—the windows and the doors appeared to have been thrown open. The wind shook the curtains. The fragrance of the mango blossoms drifted in, but nobody could understand why she wanted to go to *Kumbhamela*. Neither did she explain her strange decision.

Abinash observed that Suchitra kept looking at the mango tree all night, but still he did not compel her to go to sleep. Ever since he married Suchitra, Abinash knew that she could never be dissuaded from doing what she thought was right. This had led to a few fights at the beginning, but, afterwards, when he realised that she was a moody woman, he came to accept her as she was.

Thirty years of this peaceful co-existence had passed by. Their son was now a grown-up man. He had married someone of his choice. He is a doctor. His wife was a doctor too. Suchitra was not at all happy about this marriage. She had wanted him to marry the daughter of her childhood friend. But their son got married in a temple without informing them. The marriage was solemnised without a band playing. Abinash had explained to a heart-broken Suchitra, "Gone are your days. Our son is past the time when he used to cry, clutching your saree end. You must accept whatever he has done... We can only be happy if our son is happy. Do you think everything will happen according to your wishes ?"

Drops of tear had glistened in Suchitra's eyes. She had wiped those with her saree end. She got reconciled to her daughter-in-law. But the daughter-in-law, for her part could never treat her as her own. This came to light later...

When Suchitra had expressed her eagerness to have a grandchild, her daughter-in-law informed her that she had gone for an abortion. She did not want to have a child so early. She said, her husband also shared her view. Suchitra's dreams were shattered. She broke down and wept. After listening to all this, Abinash had then consoled her, saying, "Accept it as a mishap, not as deliberate act. Think that your daughter-in-law had a fall and the child was aborted."

Suchitra taught herself not to worry too much. But nothing in her house seemed to matter to her. Her sweet home grew disorderly and untidy.

Her son and her daughter-in-law remained busy at the nursing home all day. Office work kept Abinash occupied. Her daughter was her only companion. She studied psychology. She resembled Suchitra in many ways. Suchitra was at times apprehensive that her daughter might go astray. So she always kept a close watch on her, particularly after the marriage of her son. She tried to keep an eye on all her activities and her friends. After she left for college, Suchitra would scan her note-books to see if they contained any letters from a boy friend and things like that. If her son could fall in love and marry against her will, why wouldn't her daughter ? This apprehension made her restless. She thought of finding a groom for her before any such incident occurred.

One day, their daughter did not return from college in time. Suchitra got worried. She phoned Abinash but got the reply, "She is not a child now. She might have gone to her friend's place. Do not let this worry you."

Feeling angry and fed up, she telephoned her son too. An attendant lifted the receiver and said, 'Sir is in the operation theatre. If you have any message, it will be passed on to him.'

What could Suchitra say? What kind of message would she leave : that her daughter had run away with somebody, or was watching a movie in a cinema hall with someone or was having a good time with her boy friend in a lonely park. She put the receiver down.

At 10 O'clock, when she got the news that her only daughter had eloped with a boy to another city, she felt a mild pain in her chest. This pain gradually grew unbearable. Drops of sweat stood on her forehead. Her lips became parched.

The son diagnosed it later as a mild cardiac arrest caused by high blood pressure.

Suchitra was shifted to the intensive care unit and was treated for cardiac ailments. In due course, her daughter informed of her marriage with her boy friend in a law court in a neighbouring city. She and her husband would come back after a month...

Suchitra survived the attack. After a week-long treatment, she returned home. Although she had recovered, the wound caused by her daughter festered in her mind. She realised that she was absolutely lonely. Her home seemed like a dungeon to her.

It was around this time that she announced her decision, to go to *Kumbha Mela*. Abinash too, felt that it would be nice for her and for the family if she spent some time elsewhere. The house, which was full of life had turned into a stale and deserted shed.The photographs on the wall looked pale and colourless. The artificial flowers in the drawing room looked lifeless. A film of dust lay on the sofa. The lawn outside looked bald. Suchitra now longed to get away from such a depressing place.

Abinash booked the train tickets for both of them, the next week.

Suchitra's face was wreathed in smiles when she saw the tickets, but she did not utter a word. She waited eagerly for the day when she would commence her journey to Kumbha Mela, along with Abinash.

On the day of the journey, her daughter-in-law did not forget to give some advice regarding the timings of her medicines. She requested her father-in-law to take proper care of her. In case of any emergency, she advised him to give her a tinkle.

Suchitra seemed utterly indifferent to all this and kept silent when she boarded the train. Neither Abinash nor their son nor daughter-in-law could realise that she had great pain not because of her recent heart attack, but because of a shock she had received thirty years back...

The train pulled out of the station, leaving their son and the daughter-in-law on the platform. The din and bustle inside the train did not distract Suchitra's attention. She looked out of the window and stirred her old memories. She was feeling as if she had turned into a mango tree on which the sun beat down pitilessly. The roots had gone deep into the soil, but did not get a drop of water. Although the infinite sky hung overhead, there was no clouds nor a drop of rain. The hot sunlight dessicated her. She felt her lips drying up. Her heart-beats grew irregular. Her limbs seemed numb.

The same feeling had overcome her thirty years ago, when Jayant stood beside her. Jayant was a brave and articulate young man. He had a muscular body. When one set one's eyes on him one gets the impression that he can do almost anything.

In her adolescent days, Suchitra was in love with Jayant, and looked for an opportunity to express her feelings to him. One day, she grabbed the opportunity when she and Jayant were being honoured on a common platform at a college function for having topped jointly in the examination. There, she had invited Jayant to her house. Jayant had initially hesitated. But on her insistence, he gave had given consent again reluctantly.

Jayant never kept his promise, and whenever they met in the college corridor, he avoided talking to her.

She was annoyed by what she considered Jayant's arrogance. Once she even made a bold attempt at going to Jayant's room in the men's hostel, around noon on a holiday. Jayant did not seem surprised to see her. Rather he treated her presence in his room as a matter of routine. He was a little grave though, anticipating snide comments from his friends about Suchitra's presence.

Suchitra took her seat and without a trace of shyness in her voice said to Jayant, "I had to come all the way here. Should not you be surprised?"

"I did not keep my promise, because a great gulf divides you and me. You are a prisoner of your home. However strong it might be, no home would tie me down. No man can make a home his own forever. Within that home, there is frustration, sadness, sorrow, poverty, hatred and treachery. How long a man could call it his own?"said Jayant

Suchitra retorted, "As long as he is alive."

"Not even for a moment", replied Jayant. "I dream of a different home – a home, which would have its doors wide open – always. It would welcome everyone. It would have no boundaries."

"I could also join you there", Suchitra suggested.

"Not now. You have not attained full realisation of life as yet – you are caught in an illusion", said Jayant. "Once you are free from all this, I would welcome you into my home."

Suchitra kept quiet. She could not look up at Jayant's face. She realised that Jayant was no ordinary human being. She felt her feet were not any longer on the ground and she had soared into the sky. She shivered. Jayant fanned her with a note-book and, after some time, Suchitra felt calm.

There was a reason for which he had not come to Suchitra's house. The reason was, as Jayant had explained– "You would hate me once you know my origins. My mother lived in a brothel. I do not know, who my father is ! Many persons used to visit my mother. The charity of these unknown gentlemen enabled me to study. My mother had become a widow in her childhood, and was driven out by her in-laws. Her parents were too poor to support her for life. After a long struggle she managed to escape to this city, where she was forced by some middlemen into the flesh trade. She wept and cursed her fate, but there was no way she could escape. She had a strong desire to set up a home of her own. When I was in her womb, she was forced by the pimp to go for an abortion but she would not listen to him. For this, she was humiliated and beaten on many occasions. At last, I was born. She felt overjoyed. She managed to leave me in a boarding school. She arranged to send some money for my education and nursed the hope that she would set up her home one day. She would come out of the forbidden hamlet to settle down in a sweet home."

"Once your parents get to know of my background, they would never allow you to take such a decision – I knew it for certain," Jayant had explained and had advised her to

go back and get married to someone respectable, someone who belonged to her own world.

Suchitra wept like a child, her self-control giving way like an embankment swept away by a roaring river.

After that, Suchitra never met Jayant, not even for once. She did not have the courage to go against the will of her parents.

Obedient as she was, she married Abinash, whom her parents chose for her. Later she had received a letter from Jayant that he had renounced the world after the untimely death of his mother and became an ascetic. He had left for the Himalays, liberating himself from the illusions of the so-called sweet home. He had apologised to her for not accepting her offer of marriage and he had expressed that once a person was free from the illusions, the whole world would be home for him and no man-made home would bind him down.

This time it was Suchitra's turn to muster the courage to make a trip to *Kumbha Mela*. In spite of her ill health, she could set herself free from the illusions. She had heard that all saints from the Himalays assemble at *Kumbha Mela*.

Abinash found that Suchitra was engrossed in her thoughts, unmindful of the motion of the train. He wanted to bring her down to the earth, by offering a cup of tea. The train was rushing with great speed, making the whole compartment sway, and Suchitra was eager to set herself free from the illusions that had enveloped her the whole life. She was as though looking for the opportunity to meet someone very dear, very intimate, and take a holy dip at *Kumbha Mela*.

Soon she realized that a saint with long and straggling hair, gray beard and saffron clothes had materialised before her. His eyes were glowing. His lips had the mark of blissfull smile. Suchitra was transported to a different world. She murmured, " Jayanta, I am defeated. the home which I set up in the past with all hopes, has betrayed me, but what did you gain by turning down my offer that day."

The Saint advised her, "The persons who are defeated in life, only look for such holy-dip. If you were not defeated in life, you wouldn't have thought of leaving the home which you called your own."

He continued, "You are absolutely under the clutches of the illusions. Whenever you look inward and realize yourself the life as it is, you will be free from such illusions. Once you are free, you will be liberated. Sticking on to the home as your own, travelling with a desire to meet Jayanta – the saint, taking a holy-dip at *Kumbha Mela* with the hope of getting salvation are all nothing but the manifestations of the same illusions. First, you look inward and then will you get the results of holy-dip."

A shock wave ran through her body and she felt a halo around. She opened her eyes, and found that the saint wasn't there any longer. She was perspiring. Her body was wet, as if she had just taken a holy-dip at *Kumbha Mela.*

She did not feel the need of taking another holy-dip. She looked more contented. Life was different afterwards.

Translated by Prasana Kumar Dash

Father

Gourahari Das

Whenever he entered his own house, Sanjay felt overcome by Nausea. A pile of garbage, and its stink made it difficult for him to feel any fondness for his family. All around there was misery, a crippling helplessness, and his very existence seemed to crumble. He would scream silently.

For all these misfortunes, he blamed his father squarely. Why should someone produce so many children if he could not support them?

Sanjay was a graduate. It was four years since he has passed out of college. But he was yet to get a job, and was beginning to lose hope of getting any. Everywhere what mattered was recommendations or bribes. That was how his college friend Biswaranjan got a job as a temporary lecturer in a college. And he had secured less marks than Sanjay ! His

father was a deputy secretary in the department of education. Another friend, Naresh, got his job as part of his dowry. But his own father had no 'contacts' nor could he organise fifty or sixty thousand rupees which could help him land a job.

Days went by. He spent time staring at the cold, distant stars. What kind of life was this ? All dreams shattered and no hope left !

A few months ago, Gopinath had suggested meeting the local MLA. Sanjay was seriously toying with the idea when one morning, Gopinath said there was no point in meeting him, because Sanjay's father was a supporter of the opposite political camp.

That day Sanjay felt very bitter with his father. His ailing and bed-ridden father had defended himself saying; "How can I be disloyal to Mahatma Gandhi's Party ?"

Why should we not join the party through which we could benefit ourselves, Sanjay wanted to know. If we stick to principles and values, we will die of hunger. One should make hay while the sun shines; this is what a wise man does.

His father refused to share his views.

He looked outside. The sun had set already. He had to take food to the hospital. Sometimes he pitied his father, who lay on the hospital bed writhing in pain, but most of the time it was only anger that he felt. He wondered why such people were born at all.

His father, mother and his two sisters had now become burdens he had to carry. But Sanjay was more

perturbed by his elder sister's misdeed. He could no longer go out holding his head high after that shameful incident.

When an unwed woman sits with an infant on her lap in front of her unfaithful paramour's house and demands justice, imagine how does her brother feel?, he would ask himself.

Sushila did just that. Before she realised the enormity of her blunder, she was already pregnant. She was advised by her mother to terminate her pregnency. But Sushila, as if hell-bent on ruining the family's good name, would not agree.

After that incident, it was impossible to find a good match for the younger sister. Sanjay again blamed it all on his father.

He hated staying at home, where misery, shame, and helplessness always stared him in the face. And yet, he had nowhere else to go. He had to carry the burdens of his responsibilities.

Here there were four of them at home. And his father was a terminally ill patient lying in the hospital bed. Where would he dump them and go ? What would people say? They would blame him saying that an unworthy son had deserted his ailing father, his mother and two marriageable sisters !

Everything would be all right if only he could find a job. While in college he had felt confident that he would get a job as soon as he got a degree ! But that hope proved to be a mirage. Now he sat idle, from daybreak to night. Was there any point in living like this.

The day Sanjay came to know that his father had cancer, he was shattered. The secure roof that had sheltered

them so long, was now receding like January sunshine. He rushed to have a closer glimpse of his father's face. In the past, his father's face had seemed so ugly and useless, but now it appeared anguished and beautiful ! He pressed Sanjay's hand and said, "You must never tell your mother and your sisters about my fatal disease."

The doctor said it was too late to do anything for him. Only God could help. It was a matter of a few months only.....

The cancer had eaten in to his father's body long since, and he had no strength to fight back. He was dying slowly but surely.

Sanjay remained at his father's bedside almost twenty four hours a day. He busied himself with looking after him. He knew his father would live for a few months only.

He recalled what the doctor had said to comfort him. If an employee died while still in service, the factory where his father worked could give his dependant a job on compassionate grounds. Since he could take care of his family with that job, he should take advantage of that opportunity and not feel so disheartened.

Sanjay saw a ray of hope. He felt more attached to his father. He sensed that his father had already known his real feelings towards him, which were those of hatred and bitterness. That was why, perhaps, his father had willingly contracted such a fatal disease so that he could secure a job for his son. His father was fifty-eight and was to retire shortly.

In the dim light, Sanjay's father asked him to come closer and said, "You will never abandon mother and your sisters when I am gone. Will you? Sushila is a good girl, and in this world, always good girls are betrayed. You will never desert your mother. They have no one else to turn to, except you."

His father's face crumpled. The tear-soaked eyelids blurred his vision. To change the topic, Sanjay said, "You don't worry, father. I will look after them."

Two years had past since this conversation. The doctor said, "Your father's will power is remarkable. It is not due to medicine or care; his will power alone has kept him alive till today. A cancer patient normally does not survive this long."

Initially, Sanjay felt happy. He was glad that his father survived. But when he remembered the factory's conditions regarding the job, he felt disappointed. The faint hope he had of getting a job now began to recede. Life once again turned into a dark endless tunnel, and he could not get out of it.

If his father continued to live like this lying on the hospital bed, he would never get his job on compassionate grounds. After his fathers' retirement, the opportunity would be lost for ever.

He looked at his father. A shrivelled figure, he could not even get up by himself. He looked so lifeless ! Derelict, like their miserable house. Their entire savings had been had been spent on his medical expenses. His provident funds too had been used up. His mother's jewellery had been sold off. If his father lived for a few months more, the

family would be forced to starve, Sanjay thought pensively. They would be buried neck deep in debt. They would have to sell off their landed property, too. His father's prolonged death loomed like a terrible ghost before him.

Since the past two and a half years, their life style had changed drastically. It was long since they had experienced any joy in their house. A deathlike desolation has engulfed them.

The future appeared even more terrible than the present. What will he do? Where will he run away? Should he commit suicide and escape such a situation? Or will he simply ignore his family and support himself by working as a daily labourer?

These thoughts tormented Sanjay. His own unshaven face, shabby clothes and dejected appearance made his heart sink. He remembered the dreams he had dreamt in his college days ! He dreamt of Kalyani whom he had once loved, and who was now someone else's wife. But he did not blame her. She was a practical girl and one could not live by dreams alone.

But only if his father could die early ! Then Sanjay's job would be guaranteed. Once he started working, he would borrow and complete the last rites of his father with dignity. He would immerse his mortal remains at Prayag and send his mother on a pilgrimage in a special train. He would file a case against Sushila's unfaithful boy friend and also get his younger sister married into a decent family. After he got these responsibilities out of his way, he would dream for himself, the dreams he had buried in the depths of his heart despite the years of wretched life he had lived so far. But his father would not die. The doctor did not let him die. Both Sanjay and the doctor proved their efficiency by lengthening his life

span. The doctor wanted him to live a little longer. But secretly, Sanjay wanted him to die early. Thus they pulled the string of his life in opposite directions.

Sanjay got weaker and weaker.

He shuddered, realising his blunder. What was this ! He was planning homicide for his father? He consoled himself. No, he did not want him to die, but he could not keep him alive either ! He was only thinking of whatever was best for all of them.

History is no stranger to such stories. Sanjay thought to himself. King Jajati asked from his son Puru, his youth and longevity ! If it was not a sin for an old father to ask for his own son's youth, why should it be considered a sin for a son, who is yet to start his life, to ask for a few months from his dying father's life ??

Sanjay met the doctor twice a day. The doctor was always busy. The same questions were asked and the same answers given. But Sanjay could not ask the question that was uppermost in his mind.

The days when there was no money left to buy medicines or to buy rations for the family, Sanjay lost his balance. Such a strange man, this father of his ! Neither dying nor allowing them to live ! He clenched his fist in anger and felt like knocking his father off the cot or .....

No. He could not do such a thing by himself. Only the doctor could do it. If he could somehow give an injection to his father and snuffed out his life, no one would be harmed ! His father would be spared a painful prolonged death, and

Sanjay would be spared the humiliating exerience of having to borrow money to meet the medical expenses. The family would be saved from a terrible future.

But he couldn't say this to the doctor. He went and sat before him, waited for the patients to leave one by one. And then he returned home. Did this day after day.

The doctor got worried. He thought Sanjay was disturbed about his ailing father and he comforted him, saying, "I am trying my best, and the rest is in God's hands."

Sanjay could not bring himself to say that he should not try to save his father's life. If his father lived any longer, the rest of the family would perish.

It was evening now, the time for the doctor's arrival. Sanjay leaned his bicycle against the boundary wall of the hospital and went inside. He sat quietly on the bench. The doctor strode into his chamber and the door was shut behind him. The heavy blue curtains shook for a while, then stood still.

Sanjay was planning to meet him before the others arrived, but he could not move. He wanted to consult the doctor in private, and waited for everyone to leave. He paced around anxiously and tried to wave the mosquitoes away. By eight o'clock, the doctor was free.

Sanjay went in and stood before the doctor. His shadow fell across the table. The doctor looked up and asked him to sit down.

"Do you want to tell me something ?"

"Father......"

Sanjay could utter the word with great difficulty.

"I am trying. He looks better than he did yesterday", The doctor said, as if trying to lift his spirits.

"No. I am not talking about that. You are trying your best, but will my father get well completely?"

The doctor looked pensive.

"No, that is impossible", he sighed.

"Then for how long is he going to live ?"

"How can I say ? I had thought he would last only four months. Now you see, two and a half years have gone. But a cancer patient can survive up to 1000 days at most. By that yard-stick, it is a matter of six months only.

"But it will be too late by then?"

"Late ? Late for what ?" the doctor asked.

Sanjay got scared, and grapsed for an answer, but could not find one.

The doctor now stood up and put his hands on his shoulder. He said, 'I know about the hardship facing your family now. But there is no reason to get disheartened. Man is a slave of his circumstances. You should not compare the grass flower that grows in the crevices of rocks with the roses blooming in the royal garden. Whatever you are doing for your father is enough. What more can you do ?' Sanjay could not say anything in reply.

His mother was already asleep by the time he reached home. Sushila was rocking her infant son to sleep. His younger sister who was waiting for him sleepily, served him dinner and went off to sleep.

Sanjay felt disgusted and pulled his hair in anger. He had no appetite left. It was the same cold dishes for dinner he ate every day. As though they had lost the right to taste something different and delicious for a change !

The night got darker. A dark cloud covered the moon. A stinking smell came in from the sewage across the boundary wall. It was dark, damp, filthy inside the house, which was littered with soiled clothes, broken pieces of furniture, and rags. Is this what poets called sweet home. Sanjay wondered.

"Sweet home ! What rubbish !"

He fumed at such poets. For a poor family words like love and universe sound odd. He decided he would convey his anguish to the doctor somehow and ask him to do something to bring his father's sufferings to an end. There was no point in living such a pathetic life. In foreign countries, many such patients are opting for euthanesia that is what his father wanted, too. His father's death would benefit everyone. Why couldn't the doctor help them ?

While he was turning these thoughts over in his mind, sleep overcame him. He dreamt that the doctor was startled to hear Sanjay's suggestion. And later he also felt relieved. He said,"I too had been thinking of the same lines for quite some time. But I was unsure of your reaction. You may not approve of such an action. I was afraid. Truly, your father is suffering a lot. He cannot sleep properly, can't talk properly.

If he continued to live like that, you would lose your chances of getting the job on compassionate grounds."

Then the two of them went to his father's bedside. His father was in deep sleep. The doctor took out the injection syringe and pushed it into his father's right arm.

After a while his father became still. And the doctor and Sanjay pulled a white bed-sheet over his face. A ray of bright light fell on Sanjay's face. He got up with a start and noticed that the morning light had entered through the open doors of his room. He looked about, bewildered. But where was his father? And the doctor? There was no one around. So was he dreaming only?

He got up and went up to the well. His mother was trying to train the bitter gourd creeper up the trellis. There were red patches of stubborn ants at the roots. She sprinkled kerosene on them.

"What's the use ? It won't bear fruit any more." Sanjay told his mother.

His mother said, "So what ! It bore fruits once. Because you like karelas so much, your father had planted this for you. When he comes home from the hospital, and find it shrivelled, he will be very upset with me for neglecting it."

His mohter' words gave Sanjay a sever jolt. He remembered when he was a child, and was down with typhoid, his father had carried him on his shoulders and taken him all the way to *Aradi* to get him God's blessings. His mother even ate maggots from cow dung to propitiate God. His father fasted before Lord Gupteswar, and he was so weak that he

tottered and rolled down the forty steps and was badly hurt. It was only his parents' ardent prayers that had brought Sanjay back from the brink of death.

Sanjay began sweating. God knows why he remembered all these small details relating to his father. It was as though the memories of a dead man haunted him now.

He remembered how after he filled up his forms for his B.A. examination, Sanjay found that the gold ring on his father's fingure was missing. That was his wedding ring ! He had sold that off to arrange money so that Sanjay could sit for his exams.

His mother always said that ever since he was born, misery had dogged his father. His grand parents died after prolonged illness. They were reduced to paupers, meeting the medical expenses. And there were aunts to be married off. Then two daughters were born. It was tough with a clerk's meagre earnings to support such a large family. But Sanjay's father always said, "God gives every man according to his needs, and one has to survive on what one has got. Let destiny decide the consequences, whether one is successful or not. One has rights over ones' work only, and the results should be left to the Almighty's mercy."

Sanjay rushed to the hospital. Instead of jumping on his bicycle, he ran breathlessly, and before his eyes the image of his father flashed. His father who took him to fairs carrying him on his shoulders, and who would fetch anything his son craved for — toys and sweets ! How could he be so cruel towards such a father ?

Sanjay ran. Past the house, past the electric poles. When he reached the hospital, he found the doctor and the nurses at the bedside of his father. The doctor looked at him and patted his arm softly and said, "There was nothing I could do".

His father lay still on the cot. Sanjay felt as if he did not die a natural death; he had killed him. Draped in a white bed-sheet, his father looked exactly like the image he had seen in his dreams last night.

Translated by Monalisa Jena

This volume features the major works of famous Oriya short story writers - Ram Chandra Behera, Santanu Kumar Acharya, Chandra Sekhar Rath, Prativa Ray, Bibhuti Pattnaik, Kishori Charan Das and Jagdish Mohanty and upcoming writers - Paresh Pattnaik, Gaurahari Das, Ajay Swain, Debabrata Madanray, K. S. Sahu and Paramita Satapathy. This collection of stories, nominated by readers, publishers, writers and the editorial board represent modern literary trends in Orissa and the styles and concerns of modern Oriya writers.

Jatindra Kumar Nayak teaches English at Utkal University.



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